

We the pink squeaks
Wanderlust pad for collabing! Have fun <3 :D

Sieglinde

[center][size=150][b][i][small-caps][color=darkcyan]Sieglinde Engel[/color][[/small-caps][[/i][[/b][[/size][[/center]

[center][size=100][b][i][small-caps][color=darkcyan]in collaboration with @WeepingWisteria[/color][[/small-caps][[/i][[/b][[/size][[/center]

Sieglinde finished her packing with a satisfied smile. She had to travel quite often in her line of work, often to places with little to no facilities while also having to pack quite light and more than once very fast. That made packing something she excelled at and took maybe a little pride in.

She took a glance in the mirror. She'd dressed in a bit of a middle ground when it came to her preferred attire. A simple dress simply was the most comfortable thing for a long journey like this but she'd allowed herself boots, just to make sure she didn't end up getting pricked by absolutely everything out in the wilderness. She was never going to go anything but sleeveless though. It was just too suffocating. She'd opted for no armor upon setting out. She did have to pretend she was going on a full vacation after all but it was there resting at the bottom of her bag. Never being one for makeup, a simple hat completed her look, shading her eyes just enough that tipping it down just slightly would allow her to go unnoticed especially in the lands bordering the kingdom where there was the highest risk of someone recognizing her and trying something funny.

Satisfied with her look, she turned away, picking up her bag and taking stock of the room around her. After a cursory glance to ensure nothing was too terribly out of place, she stepped out. Walking toward the little stable she had out back, she started to prepare her friend for the journey ahead. Alice was obedient as usual looking very happy as she got a little head scratch. Well her full name was Apocalypse, but that was reserved for people she didn't like very much.

Once Alice was ready to go, Sieglinde mounted her and took off. It was slow going at first, having to ride through few fairly busy streets before she approached the outskirts of Westlio and then the outskirts of Gatlon itself. It was a pretty uneventful ride for the most part, her keeping her hat down low for most of it and sticking to the most obscure streets that she knew. And she knew them quite well. Gatlon was her playground and she knew every nook and cranny of it quite well. It was only when she finally crossed into lands that were foreign to her that she started to be just a little bit more wary about her surroundings.

Her first bit of suspicion was a woman walking all alone and on foot none the less in a street that really didn't seem like her kind of area. This was the sort of place Sieglinde walked with one eye on her back, a place with a lawlessness that was a touch famous even for one from an entire different kingdom. Those cute blonde pigtails did not generally fit into an area like this, not without at least a suit of armor or a few more scars than that. Well there was the one odd scar. Although that only made her more suspicious. This was most definitely not a woman to be trifled with. Clearly someone with a set of skills that meant she had no fear walking through an area like this and clearly someone who still managed to look far too innocent. A dangerous combination. Still she could also be someone perhaps in need of a ride to a safer part of town so Sieglinde hailed her, keeping a respectable distance from her.

"Hello there!"

The woman seemed to freeze before turning around slowly. "You speaking to me?"

"That's right!"

She seemed a little hesitant. "Oh. Well, hello."

"Need a ride miss?"

"Oh, I wouldn't want to impose. Besides, who knows if we're going in the same direction?"

"Oh I'd be happy to help. Where are you headed?"

She hummed. "Where are you headed?"

"To the badlands."

This caused the woman to pause again. "The Badlands?"

"That would be correct."

She considered Sieglinde closely. "Hmm. Last I heard, the Badlands had a... high population of foxes. Do you like foxes?"

"Umm. Foxes are...tolerable. Not tasty. A little bit mischevious. I'm neutral on foxes. I suppose they are cute but they annoy one too much to be singularly likeable."

"I see." The woman went quiet.

"What's your opinion on foxes?"

"All I know is that people go to the Badlands to see the foxes. And I'm interested in what the hype is about."

"Understandable."

"Is that why you're going to the Badlands? To see the foxes?"

"I will be seeing a fox."

"A fox? Why a fox?"

"Well to see foxes you must first see a fox."

"True. But I'm mostly interested in seeing if we're going to see the same fox."

"Oh? You're seeing a fox too?"

"I am."

"Well mine was a...dream like one."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

"Hmm. So was mine."

"Perhaps it was the same fox after all."

"Perhaps it was."

"What was its name?"

"It didn't give one."

"Fair enough."

"But it gave me a very important task."

"Oh it did?"

"It did."

"I think it did for me too."

The woman walked towards Siegeland and her horse, leaning in. "What was it?"

"Hmm? SOMething about killing dogs."

"A certain breed of dog? That has a reputation for... ruining things?"

"Indeed."

The woman looked a little shocked, before she quickly cleared her throat. "I... wasn't told someone else was given this mission."

"Neither was I."

"I..." She cleared her throat. "I would appreciate the ride."

"And I would be glad to have a companion. One does not simply waltz into the badlands alone if they're wise."

"I suppose I'm not very wise, then." The woman looked around. "I would appreciate a hand up."

"Of course." Sieglinde brought Alice a little closer before offering the woman a hand. She took it and swung herself over.

"My brother owns horses. None as big as this one, though."

"Quite understandable."

The woman folded her hands in her lap.

"I would advise holding on. It can get a bit bumpy."

"Oh, I don't---"

"Do you want to get knocked off this horse?"

The woman flushed and slowly held on to Sieglinde's waist.

"That's better." She patted Alice and the horse started to trot again. "So what do I call you?"

"My name's..." She seemed to hesitate again, looking at the ground. "Belladonna."

"Ohh? The artist?"

The woman, Belladonna, looked at the ground. "I... suppose."

"I've seen you around town before. You're quite popular."

"So I've noticed."

"Your artwork really is quite impressive. I've seen it on occasion. I always was quite impressed."

"It's..." Belladonna seemed to blush. "It's nothing special."

"Oh it is."

"Not really."

"Oh sorry then."

"You don't have to be sorry. That happens to be popular opinion. But... I was born to do it, you know? It's like congratulating someone born into wealth on their riches. They had no say in the matter. Imagine how impressive it would be if... a Soul of Chaos or Decrepit did what I did."

"I see what you mean."

"So sure, the work that I make might look nice, but does it really mean anything? Aren't I just exploiting something that was designed specifically for me to succeed?"

"Well I'd say you still play a part in it. More than you maybe give yourself credit for."

Belladonna gripped her tighter. "Maybe..."

Sieglinde shrugged. "Hey its not my place to tell you what to think. Just a humble observation."

"I know."

"Very well. Have you brought any food or drink with you? You're travelling awfully light."

"Oh, I brought some water. I tend to just... live off the land when I can."

"That's fair. I was just asking if we would have to make a stop along the way."

"I'll be fine. I'd like to make... as few stops as possible."

"Luckily I do pack quite well."

"Glad to hear it."

"Wonderful."

"Off we go then. I assume you were also planning on passing through Schober?"

"Yes."

"Lovely. I just prefer not to show my face in Waylin."

"I understand. They're not too kind to outsiders." She hummed. "What is your name? I don't think I ever asked. You feel..." She gave her another slight squeeze. "Strong."

"I'm Sieglinde. I'm not too weak."

"Sieglinde? Like the general?"

"Depends on which general you are referring to."

"General Sieglinde. As far as I'm aware, there's only one.@"

"Of which empire?"

"Gatlon...?"

"That would be me."

"My brother is obsessed with you. I don't follow politics that often, but he's usually writing stacks of fan mail and advertisement."

"Oh. I see. Well I don't blame you staying away from politics. Its often a wise choice."

"And I don't blame you for not answering my brother."

"I must admit I get a fair amount. I try to answer at least once."

"He's trying to get you to supply your army with his weapons."

"Ahhh. That could also explain it. I do recall someone who seemed a little too eager to not be someone hoping to sell to both sides."

"Probably him. He's still going at it."

"Well I'm afraid he's unlikely to be too successful although don't tell him that."

"I understand."

"Thank you."

Belladonna giggled at that. Sieglinde smiled. "I'm amusing am I?"

"You have been thus far. Though, I'm still curious if you're strong."

"Not that strong to be honest."

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[center][size=150][b][small-caps][color=darkred]Belladonna Verdorbene[/color][b][small-caps][b][size=75][i]Collabed with @KateHardy[/i][b][size][b][center]

Siegelinde was an interesting woman. Strong, but almost quiet about it. Her appearance made it pretty obvious, but her demeanor almost seemed to not want to admit to it. It was an interesting sort of contrast, brute strength and gentle touch. The sort of contrast that if it were translated into a painting would be... legendary.

Belladonna's heart seemed to flutter at the idea, but she tried to suppress it. Siegelinde wasn't a new subject. She was an ally. And allies had to be respected. Still, she was starting to get a little dizzy. She hadn't painted this morning and the full vial of red paint in her dress said that she had yet to fill her quota for the day. Hopefully they'd stop soon.

"Siegelinde?"

"Yes?"

"Do you have camping gear?"

"I have packed for that."

"Would you want to stay out here, then? I would like to... avoid towns whenever possible."

"It would be convenient to camp to be honest."

"I agree."

"Then that's what we shall do. Are you geared for a camp as well?"

Belladonna nodded. "I am."

"That suits us perfectly."

"Perfect."

"I suppose we should start looking for an ideal location then."

Belladonna nodded. "Somewhere with lots of cover, preferably some small animals, but not the hunting grounds of big predators."

"Hmm makes sense. And perhaps some water. I'm curious though. Why the small animals? Because its a good indication for water availability?"

"Well, yes. A good indication for a lot of things really. Possible edible forage, easy hunting if you're good at that. It just makes for a more survivable area."

"Smart. You seem quite experienced."

"I've done this a couple of times."

"I see. Well do let me know if you spot something. I'm keeping my eyes peeled as well."

Belladonna nodded. "I shall."

The ride continued on comfortably, even as she was slowly growing dizzier. It was becoming hard to focus on anything, let alone have an opinion.

"How does that look?" Sieglinde called out.

Belladonna just nodded. "Yep! Looks good."

"Wonderful. I'll bring us to a stop then."

"Sounds good."

After a few minutes the horse slowed to a stop. "And here we are."

Belladonna nodded. "Wonderful. Could you... perhaps let me down?"

Sieglinde got off quickly. "Of course."

"Thank you."

"You're most welcome." She offered a hand.

Belladonna took it and slid down. As soon as she was standing, her head swam and she tilted dangerously to the ground.

"Miss? Are you okay?"

Belladonna stumbled back, feeling her feet slip. Her vision ebbed and flowed and her ears roared. "I..." She felt arms wrap around her.

"Miss? Miss?"

Belladonna groaned. "I'm fine. I'm fine."

"Do you need to lay down?"

"No... I..." She shook her head, her vision clearing up to reveal a very concerned Sieglinde. "I need to sit down. And paint."

She looked a little confused but set her down. "If you must."

"Thank you." She shook her head again and found a nice looking spot on a tree root. "My soul... makes me quite sick if I don't paint everyday."

"I can see why that would happen."

"Hmm?"

"I agreed with your explanation?"

"Oh, okay."

"Sorry if I wasn't clear. I'll give you some privacy then. I should set up a little fire and some place to sleep anyway."

"I don't need privacy. But yes, a fire is a good idea."

"Alright. I'll get about making a fire then." She walked off a little into the distance.

Belladonna gave her a small smile as she opened her bag, pulling out a small canvas. It was nothing impressive, even smaller than her usual work was. Hopefully it would be enough to satisfy her soul. She pulled at the ribbon around her waist until she was able to pull her paint vial free. It looked dainty: a fully glass jar with an intricate batic-esque design. It was full to just below the stopper with an almost glowing red paint.

Sieglinde started to hum to herself as she seemed to be gathering firewood.

Belladonna glanced up at her as she started the underpainting, painting the entire canvas red. Sieglinde was carefully picking up the wood, making a neat little pile in a central location.

Sieglinde was clearly strong, and Belladonna could see her muscles ripple and flex as she carted around the wood. She felt her hands move of their own accord, feebly trying to echo the movement before her. Sieglinde was full of life, spark. Something deep within her that made the canvas feel less like paint and fabric and more like blood and bone. Like it was truly infused with something more than dye, but human essence.

Her soul quivered and stood at rapt attention like a cat in the face of catnip just out of reach. Her soul loved Sieglinde, already considered her the perfect subject.

But Belladonna didn't paint people she knew. She kept work and life [i]very separate[/i]. And maybe she didn't know Sieglinde well, if they were going to be killing gods together she would certainly know her better soon. Best to draw the line now.

She looked down at the canvas. It was a maroon, faceless silhouette. Thick arms. A wide-legged stance. And a still dripping axe held above its head in victory. Or maybe just ceaseless bloodshed. Belladonna shook her head softly. Once she painted the features, she could separate it from Sieglinde. But this kept the soul happy. For now, at least.

Sieglinde finished her neat pile and started trying to light it. It only took her two tries before there was a fire slowly roaring to life. She put a few rocks around it making it into a nice little campfire.

"Looks lovely, Sieglinde."

Sieglinde looked up with a small smile. "Why thank you."

Belladonna smiled and went back to painting. She nodded and started to set up a little camp for herself. She managed to fit a surprising amount into that relatively small bag that she'd been carrying with her.

Belladonna tried to glance up less, turning the painting into a successful hunt. A deer laid dead at the silhouette's feet. Blood pooled at a gash across its neck. The silhouette has food for the night now. Perhaps even the winter.

After a little while Sieglinde called out. "I'm all set up. Maybe I can set up camp for you too while you

finish your painting?"

"Thank you, but you don't have to. I'll be done soon."

"Are you sure? I've got nothing else to do really."

"You could rest."

"Well we're about to do that anyway."

"And you can do it sooner."

"Well we have to dine too. I might as well help make it faster for you."

Belladonna considered her for a moment before sighing. "As you wish. Just don't overexert yourself." She nudges the bag towards her. "There's a palette knife in there. Don't cut yourself."

"I'll be careful." She quickly got to work.

"Thank you."

"You're most welcome."

Belladonna smiled and pulled off the bag that she was wearing across her shoulders. It held all of her travel paints. They looked matte and muddy, nothing like her red. She chose a few colors and started painting the top layer, gently easing in details and shadows and depth. This was her favorite part of painting, watching the flat lines turn into something natural. Watching the person's face emerge like tearing off wrapping paper. She hummed a song under her breath, her eyes never straying from the bristles of her brush.

IN the background Sieglinde's humming returned as she set up camp for Belladonna as well, a slightly different tune from earlier.

Belladonna welcomed the background noise. It was a... welcome contrast for how her life in her studio was. Before long, the painting was done and she set it aside, shaking her head. "I can take over now, if you want."

"Well as it would happen. I am done."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Oh please. Nothing to apologize for."

"Well, thank you then. Now you sit down. I'll fetch us a meal."

"Are you sure?"

"I am." Belladonna grabbed her palette knife and sent Sieglinde a small smile. "Anything you would prefer having?"

She shrugs. "Not too particular about it."

"I'll get what I can then."

"Thank you. I'll set up something to cook it in."

"Thank you!"

Belladonna set out into the woods, the sounds of Sieglinde humming about fading into the gentle rustle of trees and distant birdsong. Belladonna rubbed her finger along the flat part of her palette knife. Sure, Sieglinde probably had much better weapons, but Belladonna had done this before and didn't want to learn how to use a new weapon just to hunt dinner.

She was entirely lost in thought when a white rabbit hopped up to her and sat at her feet. It looked up to her, nose quivering. Belladonna smiled sadly as she picked up the rabbit. "I'm sorry. But your death won't be in vain."

She plunged the knife into its chest, the rabbit squeaking in surprise and betrayal. Belladonna had to try hard not to cry and such a pitiful noise. But it was dinner. They could eat. She shook her head and walked back to camp, holding her head higher than she would have liked.

"Ooh is see dinner's ready?"

"Well, the ingredients are. Unless you eat raw meat."

"I do not." She gestured to a little pot she'd set up over the fire. "Let's cook."

She nodded. "Should I skin it or do you want to take that?"

"I'll prepare the spices. You can skin it."

Belladonna nodded. "Sure."

She nodded and pulled out a small pouch. Belladonna walked away, looking for a suitable place to work. Once she found one, she sat on the ground and began to carefully skin the rabbit. "Thank you for your life. I will use it well. To sustain my body and my soul." She moved carefully, with the sort of ease that came with practice. About fifteen minutes later, she set aside the skin and stood back up, the meat in hand. "Are you ready for the rabbit?"

Sieglinde nodded. "All ready over here."

Belladonna handed over the rabbit. Sieglinde picked it up carefully. She applied a small blend of spices that she'd prepared over it, carefully covering every surface before gently placing it in the pan which was quickly sizzling. The smell of cooking meat quickly filled the air.

Belladonna sat beside her painting, watching her. It took a little while for it to cook, Sieglinde humming once again as she cooked with what had to be practiced ease.

"You look very... peaceful."

"Oh?"

"My apologies, that was... unprompted."

"Oh its fine. I'm just curious as to what makes you think that."

"The way you move. It's like you just... flow from one place to next. Like a slow stream. And you're usually humming and handling things like they're delicate. Like you're picking flowers."

She smiled softly. "Why thank you. Its what comes naturally when I don't have a myriad problems banging away at my mind begging to be resolved."

"I'm glad you currently don't have a myriad of problems then."

"Thank you."

Belladonna nodded, fidgeting slightly with her apron. After a while Sieglinde removed the pot, setting it down near Belladonna.

"Fresh rabbit, get it while its hot."

"Thank you." Belladonna reached in to grab some meat.

"So how was painting?"

"It was fine. Nothing special today."

"Hmm. Do you enjoy it?"

Belladonna hummed. "Do you enjoy breathing?"

"I do actually."

"Well then, I guess there's some aspects of it I like and some aspects I have to do. I've never imagined a life without painting. I've done it so much it's who I am."

"Hmm. It seems you're a little tired of talking about painting. What other things do you get up to?"

Belladonna shrugged. "I visit my family on the weekends. I go to art auctions. Other interests were never... a part of the equation, I suppose."

"I see. Is there anything you do for yourself?"

"I eat. I maintain a comfortable living environment."

"For leisure?" She scooted a little closer.

Belladonna shrugged. "Nothing really."

"Oh. Not to tell you how to live or anything but perhaps you should. Maybe you can find an identity beyond painting."

Belladonna let out a bitter laugh. "Sounds like a dream. Unfortunately, that's what it is."

"Why do you say so?"

"Do you know who my mother is?"

"I'm not that familiar."

"My last name is Verdorbene. Does that ring a bell?"

"A little. Yes."

"Madame Blanche Verdorbene?"

"Oh I'm familiar. Quite the figure."

"That's my mother."

"A little notorious among...law enforcement."

"And a little obsessive over fame wealth."

"Yeah. Let me guess she would never let you stop making and selling paintings."

"Precisely. My sister and I are the only with 'positive press.' And she lives in fear that my sister is going to get too nasty to provide it some day. So she's hoping I'll be the family's saving grace."

"I see."

"My apologies. That's a lot to dump on you."

"Oh no worries. I was the one asking after all."

"Yes, but most don't want an honest answer."

"Well I respect and quite like an honest answer."

"Well, there you go then. Anything else that needs an honest answer?"

"What do you think of this journey we're on?"

"I think it needs to happen. And if we don't succeed, then we must do everything we can to make sure the next people will."

"That's a wise opinion."

"It's the only right opinion."

"Fair enough."

"How do you feel?"

"About?"

"The journey...?"

"Ahh.I'm not entirely sure. Its my little vacation for now. It certainly feels important but I'm taking things one step at a time."

Belladonna shrugged. "I guess some people are more distant from its effects."

"Yeah. I know morally we're setting out to do the right thing but I can't say I've been personally wronged to the point I have a personal vendetta."

"Consider yourself lucky then."

"I will."

Belladonna nodded.

"I must say I am glad to have the company."

"It... wasn't what I expected. Or am used to."

"Oh?"

"I don't... fraternize often."

"Oh why would that be?"

"Not much time for it mixed with people's... tendency to see fame and not personality."

"I see."

"I bet you have some nice friends, though."

"Ehhh.I suppose so."

"What do you mean?"

"I have a good squad. And my boss is wonderful."

"Sounds nice."

"It does. I would consider most of them friends so I can't complain. I don't really have friends outside of work which my moms say is a little bit of a problem, but yeah. I'm not exactly starved for human contact. I prefer being alone when I'm finally away from the job anyway."

Belladonna nodded. "I understand."

"Apologies. That was a bit of a ramble."

"Don't apologize. I'm just sorry you won't have that alone time."

"Oh please. Don't apologize for that."

"Why not?"

"I'm not trying to get away from a busy day here. Its a new day of my vacation. A little company is honestly quite welcome."

"Oh. Well, I hope it's as relaxing as you hope."

"We shall see. So far its been very relaxing. You've been wonderful."

"Oh." Belladonna flushed. "I'm... I'm glad."

"Of course."

Belladonna tapped on her bowl, looking down at the ground.

"I think perhaps I'd like to get to know you more than just the artist I hear about twice a year."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Your company is rather enjoyable."

"Really? What if I turn out to be an axe murderer?"

She giggles. "Well you haven't tried to murder me yet."

"Maybe I'm waiting for you to be asleep so you don't stop me."

"If so, you've done a very poor job of tricking me into falling asleep unguarded which means you're not super experienced so its never too late to stop."

Belladonna smiled softly. "Maybe."

She smiled back. "So. No problem then."

She nodded. "No problem."

"So you agree your company is enjoyable?"

"Currently, you're the only one testing that. So if you believe so, then it's true for now."

"That's a surprisingly diplomatic answer."

"I learned from the worst."

"Indeed."

"I... I'm sure getting to know you would be nice."

"Thank you."

She nodded.

"I think this will be a good journey."

"I hope you're right."

"I hope so too."

"We should probably turn in for the night. I'll take first watch."

"We should. And well if you're offering. That's rare. Everyone asks me to take first watch and usually all the watches." She chuckles.

"Oh, it's hard for me to fall asleep. So I'll usually stay up until I'm too tired to protest."

"I see. Well are you going to sleep and give me watch at all then?"

However... a certain few humans would have protection against vengeful nature. The most safe of them being a small child with blonde hair hiding behind a bush and an armored skeleton. The fox hissed at the large wolf with a scar over his left eye in front of him. "Your pack can survive without one rabbit," Jonah said, licking the blood staining his mouth. "It was my kill, after all."

The wolf stared at Jonah with disinterest. "I have no need for rabbit, [i]fox[/i]. I'm here to ask about that soul in the brush."

Jonah chittered. "Why, you want to eat it?" The wolf nodded. Jonah hummed in agreement. "So did I. If I can restrain myself, I'm sure you can, Everglade."

Everglade shook his head and sighed. "Fine. It truly is a feat for you, after all. Still... May I inquire why you bring a soul around with you? I know you having a liking to souls, but to bring one to the Badlands?"

"Many, actually! About twelve should be arriving. Please ensure they have a safe trip to me," Jonah said, circling the mighty wolf.

The wolf growled. "What's in it for me, Jonah?"

"Everglade, Everglade," Jonah clicked, "[i]You[/i] owe me. Remember our last encounter?" Jonah quickly transformed into a man, holding Everglade's paw tenderly. With a cock of his eyebrow, Everglade huffed. The wolf's transformation was far more slow (and much less dignified, as his ears and tail didn't disappear in this new form), but he eventually appeared before Jonah as a grizzly man wearing a heavy coat of his own fur, far older and wiser than Jonah.

But Jonah was far more cunning. Helping the wolf onto his two feet, Jonah kissed Everglade's hand while his fingers caressed his cheek. "Surely you recall our last engagement?" Jonah said. "It was quite tiring on my end."

The wolf pulled away. "A moment of weakness."

"Hmph, I recall it quite long, and you would never want your pack to hear about, right?"

Everglade snarled. "Cunning fox!" When the child in the bushes recoiled, the wolf's gaze softened. He took a deep breath. "Fine. Your guests will pass by safely."

"Wonderful!" Jonah clapped his hand and beckoned the child over. "We'll be on our way, then." The fox adjusted his glasses and yanked the child off with him.

"And your rabbit?" Everglade asked.

"Keep it. A gift of goodwill." The child's stomach growled, but Jonah didn't stop until they made it back to the river.

The child tugged their wrist back from Jonah. They looked entirely disgusted. 'That's not a favor. That's blackmail,' the child signed.

"You'll find blackmail more useful than empty promises and dues."

The child bit their lip nervously, then signed: 'I wanted to pet him. Looked fluffy.'

Jonah sat with the child in the river. The child dipped their feet into the river, then tracing their fingers on the running water. "You're quite demanding," Jonah sighed, before once again appearing as his fox self

and laying in the child's lap. "Go on."

The child pushed the fox off them, much to his ire. 'You're still covered in blood.'

Jonah tilted his head, then wiped his mouth. "Oh! You're right." Appearing as a human once more, the fox went about licking the rabbit blood from his jaw and fingertips. The child shuddered as they watched the strange sight.

5/2/24 Collab!!

- quick lunch (squirrel + creole seasoning + nuts)
- time skip to meeting Jonah + the chile

[center][b]Mercury[/b]

collabed with @Spearmint , @WeepingWisteria , and @KateHardy[/center]

His brain was going. Faster than a horse could run. How good was the possibility that 3 other people had the same dream? He didn't think it was likely. If it was a dream. Or had he hallucinated? Was he drugged by these people who meant him HARM?????! Best to keep his distance. At the moment, the 3 potential lunatics were getting ready to eat. At least it wasn't him. For now anyways.

The one who'd been eating the croissant earlier had pulled out some pieces of bread from her basket and added them to the meal. A delicious scent wafted from the cooked squirrel-- meaty and with a slight kick to it, probably from the spice the croissant-eater had sprinkled over it. Maybe it had rabies, and he'd be able to lose the people, if they were lunatics. He didn't trust the bread either. He didn't trust that woman one bit. There could easily be poison in it. He shifted to sit on the boulder rather than perch, but he could easily bolt away in case one of the potential lunatics tries to harm him.

The one in a red-splattered apron was leaning against the sitting horse, eyes narrowed as she painted. It was impossible to tell exactly what she was painting from here, but it seemed complicated. It was probably her drawing how she'd kill him in a very gruesome way, and that would be the last thing he'd see if they got their hands on him. He especially didn't trust her. There was probably poison in the paint, or flesh melting acid. He gnawed on his really tough and dried out bread, which he was fairly certain didn't have any poison. Much better than that crossaint woman's bread which he was certain could kill him if he ate it.

The big one was just quietly hummin to herself, staring out into the world, smiling at something that he couldn't see from this angle. Maybe she was imagining how SHE would kill him. Maybe use a hammer on every, individual bone. Or sit on him. That could probably do the job. He continued to sit there, gnawing on his bread while watching and listening very closely just in case they use code words or phrases, or looks.

The croissant lady finally spoke up, her voice laced with a tinge of suspicion, probably that he could still hear clearly from his perch. Which he could. "So, about the fox. How much did he tell you?" Her black hair framed her face perfectly symmetrically. The painter didn't look up, still painting away.

"Not much. A vague fox that one." That was true. And the fox was eerily knowledgeable. If he knew how

to kill the gods, then it would be no problem for the fox to kill him. He'd be like a little ant underfoot.

"Mm," the baker said noncommittally. She lapsed into silence again, munching on a soft piece of bread. Once in a while, her glance darted to him. Her eyebrows were drawn together, making her look a little annoyed. Probably wishing that he was dead already. She glanced towards the others occasionally, but seemed uncomfortable in their presence. Maybe she didn't know the other two. Maybe she came on her own accord to kill him, and they also just happened to show up. As for how she'd kill him, probably by shoving poisoned bread down his throat if she had to. Or she'd act really nice to try and gain his trust and when she does that she'd give him poisoned bread one day and then he'd die.

"We'll find more answers at our destination. Hopefully."

The woods was full of noises, so a simple twig snapping or the patter of feet shouldn't have been too surprising- perhaps a scared possum running by- but the rustling grew louder and closer with each second. The bush besides their camp even started to convulse. Each twitch was followed by a yelp or hiss that sounded a bit too... human. Mercury did his best to watch out for such a sound, as it could be an extra member of their group to sneak up on him. But he also needed to keep an eye on the other three. He was quite certain that yelp was humanoid. He looked over to the other three to see if there was any change in them to the thing in the bush that could kill him. But he also didn't want to move too much. Movement could be seen and he could be targeted and killed.

"Something's coming. Or... someone." The alert expression told him that either they weren't expecting someone else, or they were really good actors.

The general's intuition would prove correct, as soon enough, a delicate face appeared from the greenery. Then, with a slight struggle, the rest of the 'someone's' body arrived. Their clothes were slightly tattered, but not enough for the child to care. Mercury froze. Don't move, don't move, you are part of the rock, that thing does not see you, it is not some vicious monster that would love to eat you.

The croissant eater stood up so suddenly she seemed to get dizzy for a second. She stared at the newcomer. "Who are you?" she asked warily. Mercury came to the same deduction as he did with the potential lunatic giant.

It took a moment for the intruder to realize what was happening. Currently, they were focused on brushing the thorns and leaves from their sweater and handling the berries carried in their arm. Soon enough, the fact set in that someone had noticed them. The child turned around, staring at the group with an amazed expression, although a pale face. They were stuck in the same spot as the child observed each of them.

The croissant eater's gaze flicked to the berries curiously. "Blackberries?"

The child's gaze traveled to the croissant eater first. Then down at their berries. Then up again. With hesitation, the child put a single berry on the ground and flicked it towards the group, as if they were a pack of strays. Then, they went about eating their share as fast as possible.

The croissant eater stooped to pick the berry up, hesitated a moment, then showed it to the other two who'd originally been there. Mercury remained stiff and unmoving. That berry could be poisonous to him.

The painter looked up, finally roused from her work. Her eyes blew wide before she regained her composure. "A child." That was somewhat an accurate description. More like a little demon who could tear people's faces off.

The child glanced them over once more. An odd group, for sure. A general, a painter, a weird boy hiding on a rock in the corner (who the child was tempted to throw a berry at just to see his reaction) and a...

person eating. The child looked their worn shoes for a moment, and sighed. It would be fruitless to try and communicate with strangers, but... they could try, right? 'Who are you?' the child signed, attempting to mimic the lips of the person who ate. Mercury thought it was bizarre. Were those signals? Would he need to bolt?

The bread eater stared at the child as if confronting a fern that had suddenly started to speak in rhyme. "Where did you get those berries from? I'd been thinking berries would make a perfect dessert, but I'm unfamiliar with this area."

The large woman finally spoke, her frown relaxing slightly. "You can't be just any child."

The child eyed the large woman up and down. 'You can't be just any lady, either!' The child giggled, knowing they couldn't be understood. Still... She was right. Sighing, the child stuck two fingers in their mouth and made a loud whistle, scaring even birds in the treetops. A certain someone who happily let them go hungry would probably want to see this.

Mercury quietly but quickly hopped off the rock, startled. He remained crouched, watching everything.

So, bored, the child sat down on the grass and picked at it. It's not as if they could explain themselves until that stupid fox arrived. Though... they could entertain themselves. In the direction of the boulder that boy had sat on, the odd child grabbed a berry and tossed it. Then, they grabbed a pebble. Then a twig. Really just anything to frighten the boy. It worked. He dashed off into the forest, not wanting [i]that[/i] to continue.

"There you are!" A voice came from behind the trees. In seconds, a lanky man in a tailored brown suit appeared, grabbing the child by the collar of their sweater. "I swear, one day you'll be in real trouble and whistle for me and I will leave you! You ignorant litt-" Then the fox caught sight of the others. Smiling kindly, he slowly lowered the child. "Oh, hello. You're here earlier than expected."

The croissant eater's eyes nearly popped out of her head. She dropped the berry she was holding and pointed at the man. "You!"

"Me!" Jonah echoed, grinning ear-to-ear. "I know, I know. I am much more desirable in the flesh than I am in those silly dreamscapes. And fluffier, too!"

The croissant eater looked utterly disgusted. "Get to the point. I have a bakery to get back to." She crossed her arms.

Jonah's grin faded for a moment, examining the chef with curiosity. "Hm, you're odd. Most humans just love to take their time, wasting their little lives. I'm quite a fan of the punctuality!" In an instant, their mischievous smile appeared again. Yellow eyes traveled across the group with a hungry fascination. His thin stare landed on Sieglinde next. "Oh, now you're much more interesting in person! Intimidating, too, yet so gentle in reality. What an oxymoron you are!" The fox said. He approached the general softly, quickly shifting into their animal form as they crawled between Sieglinde's feet. The child didn't look amused in the slightest.

"I'm hardly intimidating."

The croissant eater rolled her eyes. "You just criticized humans for wasting time, and now you're wasting even more time, fox."

The painter stood up, folding her arms. She seemed almost hesitant. "What are we really here for?"

Jonah swatted away Siris's comment, moving past them without a care. Though, when the fox was in front of Belladonna, his eyes stared at her with wonder. He moved into his human body as swift as water, looming over the painter with a gleam of delight in his eyes. "Oh, you! Was I not clear enough in that dream? Though, I know you aren't used to truthfulness, are we now?" he snickered.

Belladonna didn't waver. "There's several reasons why someone would ask a person why they want to kill the gods. Namely, if they want us to take care of that for them and if they're looking for traitors to cull."

The fox's face never changed, his eyes still boring into the painter's. There was a moment of silence. Then... "Kekekekeke!" He laughed straight in her face. "Please! Oh, you silly soul!" he said, bending over in a struggle to maintain his form. "Me? Looking for traitors!? You truly believe the Gods care about such menial things!? Oh, blind, ignorant painter..." he said, clicking his tongue in feigned pity. "If the Gods even thought to give someone like you time of day, you would've been smited before I could've even seen your face."

Belladonna scoffed. "It doesn't take a god to kill dissenters. Humans and spirits alike are just as capable of getting the job done."

"Aw," the fox cooed, patting Belladonna on the head, "Poor soulful beings, always so stupid. But at least you have on thing correct! A human is sure to kill you if you dare mention this. They're so strange with their cults, so bound to certain Gods. I have no reason to harm you, you see! I'm not bound to any God, unlike... [i]you.[/i]" He said with minor disgust. "I really don't care what the Gods may think about me after this. They can't control me as they do you. Does that give you any more faith in me? That I'm not being willed by some awful, scary thing your tiny, mortal mind can't comprehend?"

Belladonna hummed. "As long as you want them gone, I'm fine with you."

Siris still looked skeptical, but her posture was slightly less defensive and more curious instead. "You know what would give me more faith in you? A concrete plan. Killing the gods isn't something you can just waltz in and do."

Quickly, the fox appeared beside Siris, his arm wrapping around her waist and holding her uncomfortably close, acting as if he'd known her for much longer than a few minutes. "In fact, Miss Siris, it is! If you know how to find them, of course. Really, I don't understand why you all are so hesitant about killing these folks. The real ones abandoned you all quite some time ago. You aren't even facing real Gods!" he laughed amicably.

Siris attempted a sharp stomp to his foot, but the fox shifted out of the way just in time. She swatted away his arm and glared at him. "I might ask you the same thing. If they're so easy to kill, why haven't you done it already?" She seemed to ignore the point about them not being real gods. Perhaps it was too world-shattering to consider fully right now.

The fox put on the facade of a dejected frown, only to rebound in seconds. With a devious look in his eyes, he continued. "I'm a mere fox. More specifically: I have no soul. So, and I never thought I'd say such a thing, that soul of your's is indeed quite essential in taking down the remnants your Gods have left behind."

Belladonna hummed. "I don't care what they are. Shadows, remnants, mere illusions. I have no loyalty to them and I will not stop this quest until one of our groups no longer can."

The fox bowed politely in the painter's direction. "My, I'm glad we agree on something. I hope it's not the last time we do so. After all, I quite like you. You intrigue me." That was probably the highest compliment Jonah could give.

"Well that all sounds rather.... nice."

The child approached from behind Sieglinde's legs, staring at their fox companion with a horrified expression. The child looked up at the general, then Jonah. Looking to Sieglinde once more, the child signed as simply and dumb-down as they could. 'He's crazy!', they signed, swirling their finger around their ear.

"I saw that," Jonah called. The child didn't seem to care.

Looking to Jonah, the child's face scrunched up. 'You said we were confronting the Gods, not killing them!'

"Oh, right. I forgot. Well, tough up, then! Plenty of humans kill quite regularly!" Jonah said, innocently.

"Take the woman you're hiding behind!"

The child looked up at Sieglinde, then stepped back just slightly.

She shrugged. "Sometimes humans have troubling following rules."

Jonah chuckled. "You can say that again." The child glanced at the general and nodded, albeit sadly.

"So...you were going to...elaborate?"

"Ah! Right. Well, you must all be pondering the reason I so firmly believe this will work, yes?" Jonah started looking around. "It's quite simple. See, years ago- I believe three hundred? So not too long- I went searching through Eazeina's personal library to entertain myself. There, I found records that I believe even she doesn't know of." The fox yanked the child from behind Sieglinde, holding their wrist tightly as they plucked a single thread from their sweater. Jonah pushed them away immediately after.

"Imagine that thing's sweater is a God," Jonah held up the beige thread, almost invisible in the light.

"When they abandoned us, this is all they left. Not even a fraction of themselves when they fled. It still is part of a God, but not enough to hold true domain. If anything, the control they exert over your souls is the weakest of their might. Now, why flee if even a sliver of them is so powerful? Well... The Gods [i]fear[/i] you. All of them. Kaotix, Imperou, even Vita-Anima, your original creator... They were scared of you! They're scared of souls, human spirit, innovation, and the power they have! The Gods we have now are really just stand-ins to make sure you didn't try to follow them."

"If souls have such power that the most almighty of Gods fear them, then surely a few of you can defeat the little thread they left behind." Jonah let the piece of the child's sweater fall to the grass with a smile, never to be seen again in such dense grass.

It was a good thing the grass was dense, since Siris promptly half-collapsed, half-sat on it. She scowled at Jonah, looking like she was trying to cover up her shakiness with more aggressive questioning. "But what can our souls do, exactly?"

Jonah shrugged. "The records weren't that detailed. After all, they didn't want a mortal to find it and figure out what you can do," he said, rather nonchalant. "Though, I imagine it's less what your soul can do, but what the body it inhabits can. For example, I may not be able to drive a stake through Untila, but a being with a soul can. Simply theorizing, though."

"Its a good theory," said Sieglinde.

"Thank you! I'm flattered." He was not flattered.

Siris narrowed her eyes. "So. Theoretically. Where is this thread of a God?"

"Questions, questions! You souls never stop," he groaned. "Where they always are! They still are said

God, just not the entire being and might. Pencerahan is still in his abode in the heavens, the siblings are still fighting for control of said heavens as we stand here, Untila is probably laughing about some other man being beheaded since she can't tell happy screams from pained ones..." A bit of personal grievance bled into his explanation. "And so on, so forth. It's not as if these threads recognize they're threads."

"Oh that's quite interesting. They may overestimate their powers which could prove to our advantage," mused Sieglinde.

"Perhaps, but I wouldn't cough at even a sliver of the Gods power," Jonah said, "Still, I believe we can find other ways in that they overestimate themselves. Our easiest target would be Untila, so I propose we attack her first." Definitely not because Jonah had a personal grudge against the youngest appearing of the Gods. "After all, she wears that blindfold all the time! Why else do you think that child can't tell pain from pleasure when it sounds the same? Just imagine what were to happen if it were, say, torn off her face?" Jonah was oddly thrilled about the idea, a sadistic glint in his devious smirk.

Sieglinde chuckled. "Your hatred for the gods is...quite frankly adorable."

Jonah's face dropped. The child giggled, only to receive a harsh glare from the fox. Still... It didn't stop a tuft of well groomed fur poking out from Jonah's back and wagging slightly. The child smiled and hugged the fluffy tail that appeared, rubbing their face in the fur.

Jonah was quick to punt the child. "Please, I hear enough of such things from this terrible thing every day."

When the child fell on the back, they groaned and rubbed a soon-to-bruise stomach. When they opened their eyes, they saw... something... in the tree tops... someone? A dark silhouette that kind of looked like the kid scared off earlier, crouched on a branch. Looking at the dirty blonde hair that was peppered with brown, it definitely was. The child stared at the strange silhouette, tilting their head for a better angle. Then, they waved. And stayed there. Staring. The other boy didn't move either, and also stared. His heterochromia eyes probably made it seem a little weird to stare at. If anything, the child didn't even seem interested in that. More so interested in the person itself. They stared, only blinking when their eyes got too dry. As did the other boy, but he could keep his eyes open for longer. 'Hi,' the younger one signed. A part of them really hoped the boy would understand them. The boy did tilt his head, curious written all over his expression, although there was still a lot of wary. His right hand twitched from where it rest on one knee.

Meanwhile, Belladonna reacted to Jonah punting the child. "Hey! What was that for?"

"How would it feel if someone rubbed their face into your hair every day and called you cute and fluffy and slept on [i]your[/i] back every night? Besides, it wasn't as hard as I usually would hit them!" Jonah stated, "I'm feeling nice today."

"I think the gods share your definition of nice." Belladonna scowled.

Jonah shook his head. "As if you're one to talk about handling children."

Siris was still sitting on the grass, gaze unfocused, rocking back and forth ever so slightly. "YarraY," she choked out softly. "If the gods are only a thread... if they have truly left... what is the point of a Soul of Isolation? How can a Soul of Isolation have so much power over a person?"

== pointing out mercury? XD YarraY was also a Soul of Isolation... ouh maybe Siris can guess that Mercury is one too tho mmm mmm i mean- he do be Isolated and weird yeep >.>

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