

## Like a Fiddle

*Knock knock.*

“Cio, are you in there?” Allison asked, staring at Cio’s bedroom door.

“What?” Cio’s annoyed voice replied.

“Can I come in?”

“If tha has to.”

Allison opened the door, popped her head in, and peeked inside to discover Cio on her bed. She was reading, holding the book with one hand above her and with one leg swinging over the bed’s edge.

“Cio, wanna come to the market with me?”

“Nay, I’m reading.”

“Please?”

“Nay, I don’t feel like it. Can’t tha do it on tha own?”

Allison came prepared. She knew she’d have to pull out the big guns.

“Please, Cio. You’re so much better at haggling than me. You always get the merchants to lower their prices. Help me out here?”

She watched Cio attempt to suppress a smile. “Maybe if tha asks *real* nicesome...”

Allison smirked knowingly. “Oh please, master, teach me thy superior techniques of barter and trade. Thy humble student begs thee,” she appealed with a bow.

Cio closed her book with a smack and rose from the bed, smirking as well. “Fine,

since tha asked so pitysome, I suppose I can teach tha a thing or two.”

“Great! Let’s go?” Allison chirped.

“Wait, Allison. What’s tha wearing?” Cio looked her up and down, as the full view of Allison’s sky blue dress with a bright fiery flower pattern emerged now that the door was fully open.

“A dress? You’re wearing one yourself right now?”

“I know what a dress is, knuckleknotted, but since when is tha wearing one?”

“I felt like switching things up a little today. White Chain doesn’t give me many rest days.”

Allison lowered her head towards the floor as she increasingly grew beet red. “And I thought it was cute,” she mumbled, staring at her toes.

Cio looked her up and down again, somewhat bewildered. “Yes, it’s... looksome,” she said.

“Right?” Allison beamed and twirled around, showcasing the full sight and making the hem of her dress rise with the circular motion.

Cio smiled at Allison as she approached her. In parts, it was Allison being adorable as she was now that summoned a smile on her face. But in parts, it was a tad of an uncomfortable smile. She was used to the sight and smell of the filth of Throne. She was used to the blood and the gore, the thievery, the treachery, and the violence that was a devil’s birthright. Allison sprinkling in an adorable sight for her sore eyes? Cute. Refreshing. Welcome. Excellent. But also unfamiliar. And hence a smidge uncomfortable. What does tha say when the human tha’s sleeping with is being cutesome on purpose in front of you? Does tha even say something?

“Aye, I like it. Very pretty,” Cio added, trying to sound confident while inconspicuously gauging Allison’s expression. Allison beamed. Cio fist-bumped herself internally for having guessed the right thing to say.

The market was bustling with life. It was strewn through the alleys like a nasty infection, pulsating and out of place. There wasn't much room on the streets to begin with, and so the spread-out stalls and canvases congealed the foot traffic into a crawl.

Allison and Cio bought some groceries to cover necessities for the next few days, which mainly consisted of vegetables and meat. Allison intently watched Cio passionately haggle with the merchants. She was quite impressed with the little devil's ferocity. It's not that Allison didn't understand how haggling was supposed to work, nor that all goods on display were overpriced on purpose, nor that she was particularly bad at it - but she just couldn't get herself to argue for *minutes* over pennies as Cio did nearly every time. It seemed to her as if the smaller the difference in price Cio was arguing about was, the more ferocious she became about it. Her being so driven over what Allison felt were small wins was sort of adorable in its own way. *Perhaps a remnant of Cio's time as a bookkeeper?* she wondered.

Nyave had asked Allison to keep a lookout for a spice named "red harrowwort". But only after arriving at the market did both Allison and Cio realize that neither of them actually knew what that was, nor how it looked or smelled or tasted like. They both agreed that they were "such babbling hollowhens" and chuckled along in search of bandages. The ones Allison used to wrap her hands in for her daily training were wearing out and slowly turning to tatters.

Turning left into a broader street, they were met with a wall of noise arising from merchants praising their wares and arguing with customers over quality and price. A permeating smell of spices, smoke, and grilled meat filled the air. A dense crowd of walkers and shoppers clogged the entire length of the street. One couldn't get past without some pushing or shoving at least. Allison extended her hand towards Cio.

"So we don't get separated in the crowd," she said.

Cio nodded and took her hand. They slowly made their way through the mob and exited taking a right turn three side alleys later. Away from the busy lane, a more comfortable stroll shoulder to shoulder was possible again. Neither of them seemed to take note of still holding each other's hands, though.

As Allison was about to turn into the alley where her usual supplier of bandages was located, she felt a tug on her hand. Cio was standing frozen in the street, staring straight ahead into the distance.

“Hmm?” Allison inquired.

“Them are new,” Cio said, pointing along her line of sight with her free hand. Allison followed her finger to see several unfamiliar merchants displaying all sorts of curious wares on canvases spread over the cobbles.

“Oh yeah. Wanna go have a look?”

“Aye. One of them in the back peddles books.”

“Do you wanna go ahead? I’ll just go get the bandages real quick and will join you in a minute.”

“Suresome.”

Cio beelined for the book vendor’s wares. He had a lot of junk on display. Many of the books were in unfamiliar languages, and dozens were boring religious scriptures. Some history of long-fallen kingdoms here and there. Several cookbooks. Finally, she spied a pile of what she was searching for - fiction. She feverishly began looking through the tomes.

Moments later, Allison found her with a book in each hand, reading through their back cover summaries.

“Found something you like?”

“Nay, not yet. These are all base tales. The same stories told a million times over.”

“Hm.”

“The problem is,” Cio continued without looking up, “that the good stuff looks just like the tedious stuff from the outsides. Tha gotsa look close to find the good treasures.”

Allison leaned over her shoulder, their cheeks nearly touching. “This close?” she

asked.

"I didn't mean literally, chucklebags," Cio said without looking up.

Allison smiled as she straightened up again. She knew that getting the devil's attention away from her loot was an uphill battle at the best of times. So she didn't mind Cio digging through tomes. Instead, she chose to pass the time by browsing the other wares on display. There was plenty to see - jewellery and necklaces, figurines of characters she had never seen before, strange-looking tools and trinkets, gems and stones, plates, dishes, and vases. A particular wooden object however caught her attention, and she went to pick it up. It had a flat, pleasingly curved, and hollow body, from which a neck protruded outwards, ending in artful swirls. Strings were attached from the instrument's swirly head down to its body along its neck. It looked remarkably like a violin. As Allison picked it up, she heard Cio screeching.

"I can't believe it." Cio had jumped to her feet, clasping onto a book. "Tha, merchant, I want this book. How much?"

"That one's twenty-five," he replied with the professional disinterest of an experienced haggler.

"Here's thy coin," Cio paid him.

"Wow, not even going to try to haggle? Must be a real treasure then?" Allison asked.

"Aye, Allison, this is *Nora Multiverse*. *Nora Multiverse*. I'd thought I'd never see it again!"

"You've read it before?"

"Tha hasn't?"

"No?"

"Allison. Allison." Cio took a sharp breath. "Tha has to read this. Tha *needs* to read this. This," Cio tapped the cover (and her feet on the ground), "is the book that got me into writing fan fiction. A longsome time ago. But this is what began Cio the

Fan Fiction Writer.”

Only now Cio noticed Allison holding the violin in her hands. “Hast tha found something interestsome too?” she asked, barely containing her excitement over her new loot.

“Oh, this? Not really, it just really looked like an instrument we had back home on Earth. We called it a violin. Or a fiddle.”

“Can tha play?”

“No. Even if I could, the bow is missing.” She squeezed the violin between her left shoulder and cheek, gesturing how the instrument would’ve been played with the bow.

“Tha looks ridiculous.”

“I know, right? I never had much of a posture. But the sounds skilled players could get out of these were beautiful,” Allison said as she put it back in its original place on the ground.

“You know, we used to have an expression, back on earth,” she added. ” ‘To play someone like a fiddle’. It means to manipulate someone easily.”

Cio raised an eyebrow.

“I never understood it,” Allison continued. “Fiddles were famously very hard to learn to play. You had to start as a kid to get good.”

“Tha humans are a strange bunch.”

“We are, aren’t we?” Allison chuckled and noticed Cio holding her newly acquired book tightly in her arms. “So this Nora Universe, was it? What’s it about?” she asked.

“It’s *Multiverse*,” Cio replied emphatically. “And it’s about this girlie who is being hunted down by an empire for her mother’s crimes. They think she is her mother. So she’s hiding in this remote world with her mother’s friends and her father, and she’s uncovering her own powers slowsome and the truth behind what happened.

I forgot to tell tha, her mother had died in childbirth, and ...”

Cio rattled on as they made their way back through the market. Allison led them the long way around, not being in the mood to squeeze through the crowd again. She much preferred to be able to listen to Cio breathlessly tell her all about this Nora’s adventures, who apparently routinely made friends out of enemies who initially intended to kill her.

They went up a flight of stairs and continued along a minor inner wall of Throne’s district rings. Allison looked over the sea of roofs stretching between the stony remains of past gods and pillars of smoke rising to the heavens. A fresh breeze carried Throne’s foul stench away with it, and Allison felt that she didn’t want to head home just yet.

“How about we take a break here?” she suggested. “And maybe have a drink?” she added, spotting a vendor with a cart close by.

“Suresome,” replied Cio. “Anyway, so turns out what happened was she disguised herself all this time and led the entire rebellion against her sisters and herself. Imagine that, she literally waged war on herself. And none was wise to it. Not even her closest circle. Except for that one closest servant of hers, of course.”

“Uh-uh,” Allison uttered, signalling she was paying attention as she took the two cans of beer she bought off the vendor’s hands. They went to sit on the ledge of the wall, letting their feet dangle. Allison handed Cio the other can.

“Just please don’t tell White Chain about this, okay?”

“Tha wants me to keep Nora Multiverse secret from stoneyarse?” Cio was indignant.

“No, the beer. She’s not allowing me any booze. Says it’s unwise. And makes restraint hard. And that drunk is the opposite of emptiness.”

“Pah. The heateater knows none of the pleasures of the flesh. With it, tha flesh rots. Without it, tha mind rots. She doesn’t know what that’s like. She doesn’t know what this is like,” Cio said as she put her can aside, laying her head on Allison’s lap

with a smug grin.

"I guess," Allison agreed, caressing through Cio's hair.

"So then," Cio continued, "Nora's mother gets her servant to disguise herself as the rebel, and pretends to murder her in her palanquin, in front of the entire court. Fakes her death, brilliant some, and they escape..."

Cio continued recounting her favourite story until the dusk set in.

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Nyave was sitting on the porch, relaxing and drinking a cup of tea, when the two returned home.

"Hi there. Back from your date?" she greeted.

"We weren't on a date, strawhead, we went to the market," Cio replied, while Allison was testing whether the power of the Key of Kings also came with the ability to kill with a single look. Unfortunately, it didn't. But the message got across nevertheless.

"Oh, right. My mistake," Nyave said sheepishly and slurped her tea.

Upon observing Nyave's reaction and Allison relaxing her expression just a bit too slowly, it began to dawn on Cio.

"Wait, did tha take me on a date?"

"I would *never*," replied Allison as she climbed the stairs and entered through the front door.

"Tha did! This was a date, wasn't it?"

"No, Cio. I know you don't date," Allison said as she was setting down the shopping bags in the main room. "You made that abundantly clear. We went grocery shopping to the market, and then we took a break and had a can of beer. That's hardly a date, is it?" Allison smirked.

"Tha vixen, tha-"



“And now, I’m going to take a bath,” Allison added calmly, ignoring Cio’s rants. She strutted towards the bathroom, making sure to slowly unzip the back of her dress while still outside. Before disappearing through the door, she shot the riled Cio a sharp side look, ascertaining that her bare shoulders and back had indeed captured her attention.

As the hot water began filling up the tub, Allison observed her reflection’s smirk widening into a victorious grin. She wiped it off her face as she popped her head through the doorframe again, pressing her dress onto her chest so it wouldn’t fall off completely, yet barely covering herself. A fuming Cio was standing in the same place where she had left her.

“Are you not coming?” Allison asked innocently.

Cio stared at her. Allison could hear the gears in her head turning.

“Pah!” Cio exclaimed in defeat, dropping the bags she was carrying to the floor. She stamped towards Allison, unbuttoning her shirt. “I’ll pay thee back for this tenfold! Nay, twentyfold!”

Cio entered the bathroom as Allison dropped her dress to the floor behind the cover of the door. She bowed down towards Cio, who was still undressing and facing away from her and wrapped her hands around the petite devil’s waist.

“If you want to pay me back so badly, you could do that thing with your tongue that drives me crazy,” she whispered into her long ear and placed a long, soft kiss on her cheek.

Cio turned around in Allison’s hands to face her, putting her hands on her waist and sliding them down. “If tha wants me to do that, tha has to earn it first, hotarse,” Cio whispered, carefully digging her nails into the warm skin of Allison’s butt.

Allison cupped Cio’s cheeks, sporting another victorious smirk. *Like a fiddle*, she thought, as she leaned in to kiss her.