

The Return to Luminos By A. M. Sohma

Kit dodged a werewolf player and marched forward as quickly as possible while retaining her elf grace. When she zipped around a corner of the road, the giant hedge that acted as a wall ended, revealing the sprawling and magnificent Guildhall.

“Is there a reason why we are practically *running*?” Noir complained. He breathed heavily, but he was right on her heels. “When I elected to join you and skip the ‘fun’ and ‘celebratory parade’ with everyone else from Elba I *didn’t* know we would be trying to break a Retha sprinting record.”

Kit course corrected so they made a beeline for the Guildhall. “I want to catch the guildmasters of all the big guilds before they find out we’re back and keep them *inside* so we don’t have a public...altercation.”

“Still think they’re going to yell at you, huh?” Noir asked.

“I’m *positive*,” Kit said grimly. “They were not pleased that the Empress kept us in Elba for an extra day.”

“Kitten,” Fortune said, sounding scandalized as he and his NPC sister, Fame, trotted behind them. “That man is only wearing a loincloth for armor.”

“Don’t look, Fortune,” Kit instructed. “I’m sure he’s doing it for the...er...image.”

“He doesn’t even have *shoes*!” Fortune gestured.

“Stop pointing at him,” Kit said in exasperation. (It was a good thing Pax had agreed to return to his egg/pearl before entering Luminos as he would have greatly exacerbated the problem.)

“His loincloth is a fairly common goblin drop,” Fame reported.

Noir whipped around long enough to gape at the NPC. “Do you mean to tell me he is wearing a *used* goblin loincloth?”

Fame shrugged and repeated, “His loincloth is a fairly common goblin drop.”

“Gross, I think I just threw up in my mouth,” Noir grumbled.

“Focus, Noir,” Kit said as they left the broad road and started up the much smaller walkway that sliced between two mazes of hedges and led straight into the Guildhall. “We need to drop Fame and Fortune off in Milk Crown’s guildzone before we—” Kit cut herself off and skid to a stop.

“Before we what? Run into those idiot guildmasters—oof.” Noir wasn’t watching Kit—he was still gawking at the loincloth-wearing player—and as a result smacked into her back.

“Ahem,” Phizzy—guildmaster of Corporate Force coughed. Behind him Ryunosuke of Tainted and Half Fang of the Killing Squad glared.

“Oh,” Noir said. “Whoops.”

Kit gratefully let her elven race traits take over, allowing herself to adapt an elegant pose. “Hello.”

“Kit!” Gared—the guildmaster of KOS—slipped between Ryunosuke and Half Fang, and offered her a smile and his hand. “Alistair gave me a brief report of the fight. You did an amazing job!”

Kit shook his hand and returned the smile. “Thank you. I couldn’t have done it without her.”

“Actually, you could have,” Gared grunted. “But I’m glad she could help you anyway. If she ever shirks her responsibilities and spends her time waltzing around fraternizing, let me know.”

“Alistair has always been willing to help,” Kit said. “I don’t believe I’ll ever have a problem with her.”

Gared raised his eyebrows. “We’ll see. Noir—how are you holding up?”

Noir sniffed and flicked a lock of his purple hair from his forehead. “Well enough, I suppose.”

“If you will excuse the interruption,” White Lady, the guildmistress of Silver Army, started, “But I believe we have more pressing topics to discuss...”

“Like Elba,” Phizzy said bluntly.

“And how you went behind our backs,” Half Fang growled.

Shuck a bag of corn! I came running here because this is exactly what I wanted to avoid—a public confrontation. Only this is even worse because I don’t have Solus Miles backing me up. “I didn’t try to hide my actions,” Kit said. “All your first officers knew what I intended to do.”

“And yet mysteriously none of them informed us of their actions,” Ryunosuke growled. “You’re not just satisfied with doing whatever you want, you’re trying to turn our people against us!”

“That’s not entirely true,” Gared said. “Alistair told me. I simply chose not to inform the rest of you.” He sighed and slapped his hands on his thighs, making his chainmail jingle.

“I don’t know why your first officers didn’t tell you what was going on,” Kit said. “I certainly didn’t forbid them from talking about it. That’s a conversation you’re going to have to have with them.” She cast a nervous glance over her shoulder.

Even this far north in the city, Kit could hear the trumpets and drums from the celebration, led by ViolentAlice and Diablio. (Nearly everyone who had taken part in the goblin siege had coordinated with the two guild leaders for a joint return to Luminos that involved a parade and a general spectacle. Kit had known it would attract attention, which is why she moved in front of it, hoping to get the guildleaders before they left the guildhall. That effort had obviously failed.)

“In this matter I do agree with Kit,” Phizzy said. “I, for one, trust Nyx to make an informed decision in my absence. But I still do not like it that you led her to Elba when we decided we wouldn’t take any action.”

“That just shows this is truly all your fault,” Noir said with scorn crusting his words. “You all assumed Kit would be as helpless and dim-witted as you. She’s the girl who beat Malignus—did you think she couldn’t muster up a fighting force of her own?”

Kit wedged an elbow into the divine oracle’s side. “You’re really *not helping*, Noir,” she whispered.

“Well it’s not *my* fault they are both pig-headed *and* short-sighted—”

“Noir!” Kit hissed as she wondered if she could risk glancing over her shoulder. *The parade music is getting louder...*

“Kitten,” Fortune started. “That werewolf has *terrible*—”

“Not now, Fortune!” Kit said, her voice going up an octave. (The *last* thing she needed was Fortune bashing all of the guildmasters’ armor sets.)

“Your actions don’t do much to convince us that we can trust you, Kit,” Phizzy continued.

“If you really felt that strongly, we could have continued the discussion,” White Lady said.

“Really? Because I got the feeling that since everyone besides Gared thought nothing could be done, you were through discussing it,” Kit said.

White Lady’s smile didn’t falter, but even Ryunosuke nodded a little and shrugged.

“Perhaps...” White Lady said. “But from what I heard, it seems you had friends in Elba. If we had known, we might have changed our stance.”

Kit glanced over her shoulder—the procession was *quite* loud by this point. *How did they get north so fast? I thought they would take forever to get up here...unless Solus is leading them. Then he’s probably got them all jogging.* “That’s a fair point,” Kit said, somewhat distracted. “Why don’t we talk about it more *inside*?”

“What, you’re afraid of embarrassing yourself more than your terrible character already does?” Ryunosuke snorted.

“No...” Kit said slowly.

Half Fang shook a furry finger at her. “You won’t distract us. You’re going to get taken down.”

“I’m not trying to distract you. I just think we should choose a better spot,” Kit said.

“No, I think a public display might be necessary,” Phizzy said.

“Umm,” Kit looked down at her feet and listened to the trumpets that were loud enough they made her innards buzz. “I wouldn’t be so sure about that...”

“You all are taking this far too personally,” Gared said. “She went and she won. Really, it’s up to her to do whatever she wants with her party.”

“Except her party contains *our* first officers!” Ryunosuke scoffed.

Phizzy twirled his mustache and glanced over at the ninja. “If that upsets you so much, Ryunosuke, you ought to discuss this with Reynard.”

“Enough talking!” Half Fang shouted, his voice almost animalistic.

“Yes,” Kit agreed as she strained her ears, still trying to judge if the music was blasting just past the hedge walls or if it was—as she hoped—still a block or two down. “Let’s go inside.”

“No, I’m afraid your set-down must happen here, Kitten Lovemuch,” Phizzy sighed.

“I’m not taking part in this,” Gared said flatly. “I stand with Kit.”

Half Fang scoffed. “Weakling.”

White Lady hesitated, then timidly added. “There is something to be said for her victory.”

“Regardless of whether she won or not,” Phizzy said patiently. “She acted against our wishes. She should have shared all available information at the very least, and ought to have told us of her actions *before* she left. Quite frankly, it has me doubting our decision to follow you, Kit, as it makes you appear impulsive and unprofessional.”

Kit had to bite her tongue from delivering her own snarky line about unprofessionalism and abandoning players. *Focus! I’ve got to get them out of here.* “Um,” she said, searching for the right words.

Far down the path, Kit heard a distinct squawk, “*You suck!*”

Kit froze. *Oh, no. Please, no.*

Evidently, all the guildmasters heard it as well, for they looked past Kit.

“For once I am inclined to agree with you.”

Kit slowly turned around, grimacing when she saw Diablo and ViolentAlice strolling up the path.

Teara and her Observational Fiends guildmates who had gone to Elba followed behind them, stony expressions settling on their faces.

Chocolate Chip me! While I'm not going to take the guildmasters' scolding sitting down, it's going to be a morale nightmare if enough people see us arguing outside and word gets out about it!

“Diablo, ViolentAlice, have you finished with your parade so soon?” Kit asked as she planted herself in the middle of the path. “That didn’t sound nearly as long and epic as you planned!”

Diablo glared at the guildmasters behind Kit. “We cut it short after we reconnected with friends here.”

“Imagine our shock to learn that the top guilds *knew* that NPCs were joining you, and that the whole game is designed to pit us against Valdis.” ViolentAlice’s deep male voice was rather at odds with his female character, but he still managed to look scary in his anger.

“It made us wonder why we hadn’t heard this before,” Diablo said.

Gared grunted. “It was our failing,” he acknowledged before he nodded to Teara. “Welcome back, Teara.”

“Thank you.” Teara offered the KOS Guildmaster a brief smile before shifting her gaze to everyone else.

“I’m glad to see you are in one piece.” Phizzy smiled.

“Yes, thanks to Kit.” Teara propped a hand on her hip. “Which is why Observational Fiends pledges an alliance with her.”

Behind her, Metronome, Konk, and Shooty D’Arrow—a bard, rogue, and hunter who had fought with Kit in Elba—nodded in support.

Phizzy blinked in surprise. “Oh.”

“You’re won over just like that?” Ryunosuke scoffed.

“Yes.” Teara stated in an even voice. “Because *that* was something none of you even tried to do.”

White Lady’s forehead wrinkled with concern. “Yes…”

“Hey, hey.” Diablo snapped his fingers. “Don’t forget about us. I’m ticked! How dare you all try to boss us around claiming you know what’s best when you don’t even tell us it’s possible to beat the game!”

“You are either bottling up information on purpose, or you’re just *terrible* at leading,” Violent Alice added.

“Butt out, noobs,” Half Fang grunted. “When you have the record my guild does, then I’ll listen to you. But if you don’t want to respawn in a few moments, buzz off.”

ViolentAlice merely raised an eyebrow and Diablo scowled. “Oh, sure,” Diablo said. “That’s an impressive way to prove you are superior and better than us—threaten violence. A surefire way to inspire people to follow you—if they are mindless thugs, that is.”

“*What* did you say?” Half Fang growled.

“Kit,” Phizzy said, barely audible over Diablo and Half Fang’s exchange. “Was it really necessary to have this payout here?”

“*You* were the one who insisted on staying here!” Kit said, keeping her voice light and airy—which made her words that much more annoying, she knew. “I tried to get you inside, I insisted on it even, but—as you might recall—you said a *public* display would do me some good.”

“It was my error in forgetting what a strategist you are,” Phizzy said.

There was a gust of wind, and Kit felt an arm wrap around her waist. “That was a *compliment*, wasn’t it?” Solus Miles said in a voice that allowed for no disagreement.

“Solus Miles...you’re still with *her*?” Ryunosuke asked.

Rather than answer the ninja, Solus leaned his head against Kit’s. “They weren’t picking on you, were they?” he asked in a throaty voice that almost sounded like a purr.

“No, not at all,” Kit said, fighting a blush.

“She’s lying,” Noir said. “They were all prepped to yell at Pinkie out here.”

“In armor that is rather *terribly* modified,” Fortune muttered.

“Now they won’t,” Solus stated.

“Yeah,” Teara nodded. “Observational Fiends won’t stand for it.”

Behind Teara, her guildmates nodded.

Phizzy removed his gold spectacles so he could rub his eyes. “This has become a mess,” he muttered.

White Lady curiously gazed past Kit and the others. “Is that a parade?” she asked.

“We’re celebrating our win in Elba,” ViolentAlice said.

“Kit was *supposed* to ride in the front,” Diablio complained. “With her celestial being out on display!”

Gared squinted, taking in the small part of the procession that was visible and crowding up the courtyard. “What the heck?” he growled as he spotted his first officer riding on top of a war elephant. “Alistair!” he bellowed as he stalked down the path, making for the procession.

“Gared! Hello!” Alistair waved from the top of the elephant and shook her head, making her black ponytail flare behind her. “Isn’t this a marvelous pet? I think we should get one for the guild.”

“Get down from there! If you fall off and break your neck you’ll dent your armor!” He shouted.

Alistair ignored him and instead patted the elephant. “Though it is a pet, it can carry up to six people. Oh—if we got one for you it could fetch things from tall places for you—that’s impressive *and* practical!”

In his rage Gared appeared to speak a new language.

“Reynard,” Ryuonsuke snapped when he saw his first officer in the parade, poking bunches of colored fire that the fire dancers had created. Ryunosuke shouldered his way through Observational Fiends, making a beeline for Reynard.

When Diablio waved to some of his guildmates, they struck up the trumpet blasting and drum playing with renewed vigor. “Let’s go for another lap!” he declared.

“Glory hog,” ViolentAlice said.

“Oh, so Steadfast will bow out of the procession, then?”

“No.”

“That’s what I thought!”

“Oi, we’re not done here,” Half Fang sniffed.

Solus Miles rested his free hand on the hilt of his giant sword. “Yes, we are.”

The werewolf flattened his triangular ears and narrowed his golden eyes, but eventually nodded his wolf head and looked away.

Kit—still held secure by Solus—shifted in his grasp so she could address Phizzy, who was ruefully studying the chaos around him. “Would you like to discuss Elba at a later hour?”

“No, I suppose not. At least not in the way we planned, for it seems we judged wrong, and you were right to return to there,” the gnome sighed. “Though I do hope next time you’ll *tell* us your plans, and that you’ll still explain what happened in Elba?”

“That’s reasonable,” Kit agreed.

Phizzy nodded. “Well played, Kit.”

“I didn’t really mean to,” Kit said.

“Perhaps you didn’t,” Phizzy agreed. “But you are obviously seeing the returns of your earlier investments, and that is more what I was referring to.”

“Thanks...I guess,” Kit said. “Though I didn’t do it for personal gain, but the players.”

Phizzy looked thoughtful as he nodded. “I see. If you’ll excuse me, I think I will follow Ryunosuke’s example and search out Nyx. Care to come with me, White Lady, and find Waffle?”

“Yes.” The elven lady paused then slightly bowed her head to Kit. “I apologize, Kit, for...”

Kit waved her off. “I’ll tell everyone the whole story after we get settled. Then we can prepare for the next NPC target.”

White Lady smiled, then followed Phizzy down the pathway, heading for the procession.

“Who do you plan to target next?” Solus asked Kit as he released her and stepped back, giving her room.

“I was thinking the Fae Kings,” Kit said. “I’m hoping they’ll be an easy win.”

Solus Miles shrugged, then glanced at Fame and Fortune. “You’re taking them back to your guildzone, still?”

“Yes. Do you want to come?”

Solus nodded, and together they made for the Guildhall doors, leaving the exuberent laughter and music behind them.

THE END