

First Officer

A Second Age of Retha Drabble

By A. M. Sohma

Gared, Guildmaster of KOS, handpicked Alistair as his First Officer.

Some rumors said it was because they were an “item,” and it had become a KOS tradition for the Guildleader and First Officer to be in love.

Other rumors claimed it was because they were friends offline.

A few people even said it was a requirement from the previous KOS leaders.

All of them were wrong.

Gared thoughtfully rubbed his chin as he studied his guildmates. They had just finished a successful raid, so all KOS members had descended on the Bloodthirsty Bunny Inn to celebrate.

The guildmates chatted with animation, swapping stories and observations on their successful campaign.

“Guild enrollment is down,” Gared said.

Noir, one of the best healers on the server and Gared’s friend—though it would take torture for the sour man to admit it—grunted. “You are surprised? All the big guilds are shrinking at an abnormal rate.”

“Yes,” Gared agreed. “The playing style has shifted in Retha. It seems like most people prefer small parties now to large-scale raids. It’s why most of the big guilds have shrunk or disbanded.”

“That, and because big guilds are despicable.” Noir swirled his chalice of elf wine and eyed the rejoicing guildmembers. “The pressure they put on healers is terrible. Everyone is so demanding. Always wanting free buffs and blessings.” His purple bangs briefly screened his eyes before he pushed them to the side. “Actually, scratch that. *All* guilds are despicable.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Gared said, taking no offense in Noir’s rant. (He had been friends with the oracle long enough to know there was nothing personal in the man’s disdain. And even if he refused to join KOS he’d still raid with them occasionally. Granted, he complained every step of the way, but he was also why they had cleared the final boss in the dungeon.)

“You think you can do something to combat it?” Noir asked. “KOS was already shrinking when you inherited it.”

“I’m hoping to choose a First Officer who will help me in recruitment.” Gared said.

Noir eyed him. “If you offer me the position I will block you. Forever.”

Gared snorted. “I said I wanted help *recruiting* people, not that I intended to drive them away.” He thoughtfully watched a female cavalry knight as she reenacted a part of the final battle with great animation. (He was mostly interested in the way her table was filled, and even the few non-KOS guildmembers who were hanging out in the inn were avidly listening to her story.)

“Players would line around the block to play with *me*,” Noir sniffed.

“Yes,” Gared agreed. “Players who already belong to guilds. No, I need someone to draw in the crowds.”

“Solus Miles?” Noir suggested. “He’s an up-and-coming. Word has it he’ll soon become the top player on our server.”

Gared laughed. “I’m flattered you think I could recruit him when everyone else has failed. No, I like my plans to be realistic.”

“Oh. Then my suggestion is to find the most attractive male and female you can find and make them your co-First Officers,” Noir said.

“It would work, but I want new recruits to stay,” Gared said.

Noir rolled his eyes. “Why don’t you just ask for a Celestial Being pet while you’re at it?”

Gared smiled and glanced again at the animated cavalry knight. “I think it’s more possible than you believe it is.”

“If I agree will you stop talking to me about this?” Noir asked. Though his words were caustic, his quick glance at Gared confirmed he wasn’t *that* uncaring. “Unless you spit out who you have in mind.”

Gared nodded in the knight’s direction. “Her name is Alistair. She’s been with KOS for over a year.”

Noir clinically studied the knight. “She has charisma and an easy way with words,” he admitted.

“She’s also eye-catching, popular, and has never met a stranger,” Gared added. “She can be a walking advertisement for KOS.”

“*If* you can get her to concentrate,” Noir said. “She’s good in a fight and follows orders, but I recall that she had the focus of a squirrel when you were relaying the raid plan.”

“It’s the downside of her charisma,” Gared agreed. “But if she can keep our recruitment up, I’ll bear with it. Or I’ll promote a few other guildmembers to junior officer to pick up the slack.”

Noir shrugged. “It’s your grave. But I’d make sure you can stand her before you put her at your elbow from now until the day you stop playing.”

“Why?” Gared asked. “She’s a good player and pleasant enough.”

“Just saying,” Noir said into his chalice. “If I had to be with someone that *charming* day in and day out in this game, I’d strangle her.”

Gared laughed at his friend’s observation, but he didn’t give it much thought.

He was prepared to accept Alistair’s lack of concentration if it meant saving KOS’ dwindling numbers and bolstering their ranks again. Besides, if she was a genuinely nice person, surely she couldn’t be annoying.

Right?

Unfortunately, Gared was wrong. *So. Wrong.*

“This is such marvelous idea, Gared!” Alistair said with great enthusiasm as she watched all online KOS members gather in the guildzone.

They were prepping to enter the seasonal winter-themed dungeon Eternal Chase launched every Christmas, and for the fun of it Gared had asked everyone to attend in properly festive colors and costumes.

As a result, the area was a sea of red and green, and was almost deafening with the jingling sound of tiny bells sewn to boots, winter caps, and scarves.

“We can’t be serious all the time—no one would want to play long term,” Gared said. “Besides, at the end of this dungeon we get the chance to ride Santa’s flying reindeer—it’s a real blast.”

“I see—it does sound interesting!” Alistair adjusted the Santa cap she had pulled over her silky ponytail. “But you’re only wearing your regular armor?”

Gared glanced down at his red hauberk. “Yeah, it was the easiest option.”

“I’m disappointed.” Alistair sighed and patted her black leather belt—she wore the complete Santa armor set, even though it was technically only light armor and was entirely constructed out of cloth. “I was hoping you’d wear green.”

“Why?”

Alistair stared at him as if the answer were obvious. “Because then we could be Santa and one of his elves!”

Gared slowly blinked. “What?”

“Originally I thought I could be the elf given that you are my superior, but you’re so much *shorter*. It would look downright silly,” Alistair rattled on. “But now that I think of it, it was rude of me to hope you would dress like an elf without saying anything. I’ll know better next time.”

Gared felt a muscle in his face twitch. “I’m not short, Alistair.”

Alistair eyed him. “I hate to inform you otherwise, Gared, but...”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s just that I used my real height when I made this character rather than most everyone else who added inches during character creation, like you.”

“I am also using my real height,” Alistair said.

Gared—a good four inches shorter than his First Officer—gaped up at her. “*What?*”

Alistair didn’t seem to notice his shock. She adjusted her Santa hat again as she studied their teammates. “Yes, a friend told me I should consider going shorter, but from the day I joined I had my heart set on being a knight, so I thought my regular height might be an advantage. And it has been.” She gave Gared a glowing smile. “Because it means I can also get items and gear off high shelves for you!”

Gared ground his teeth together. “How thoughtful.”

“Thank you! I do try.” She paused. “Are you certain you won’t switch to the holiday elf armor set?”

“*Yes.*”

“Very well, then! I suppose there’s no rules that say Santa’s elves can’t wear red.”

“I am *not your elf!*”

Yes. Very wrong indeed.

Eventually, he learned how to deal with it—or rather he learned how to lead Alistair without wanting to kill her.

Gared stood on a dais, waiting for more of their guildmates to arrive before he launched into the battle plan for their next PVP match. Alistair was, of course, fraternizing with an ever-growing group of players.

He was tempted to haul her up on the dais—she was partially why the guild was not yet ready as everyone crowded around her like fangirls and fanboys at a music concert.

But, as Gared had planned, she was also why KOS had stopped shrinking and actually gained new members, cementing it as one of the largest guilds on the server. Though she sometimes tried Gared's patience, Alistair was a large reason for their success.

"Hello Gared!"

"Hey there, Guildmaster!"

Gared waved to the players and smiled. "Alistair," he called.

The cavalry knight didn't notice, and continued her animated tale.

Gared rubbed his eyes and tried again. "Alistair! We need to get started."

She gestured widely and spoke loudly, even as her audience began cracking smiles as they looked between the First Officer and Guildmaster.

Gared sighed and almost hung his head. *Why couldn't she react to any other word?* "Alistair," he snapped. "*Heel!*"

"Yes, Guildmaster!" Alistair bound up the stairs with the enthusiasm of a happy dog. She circled around him once before settling in just behind his right shoulder.

"Thank you," Gared dryly said.

"Of course!" Alistair smiled brightly, though her look turned introspective as she tapped her chin and peered down at him. "You know, I have a friend who has carving as one of their crafting classes. She'd be happy to make you a stool or something for you to stand on during strategy talks."

"*No thank you, Alistair,*" Gared said through clenched teeth.

Alistair laughed—an infectious sound that made Gared glance back at her. "I'm glad you're my Guildmaster, sir."

Gared lifted an eyebrow. "I doubt that."

"It's true," Alistair insisted. "There's no one else I'd rather serve under."

Gared grunted and squared his shoulders, but he was dimly aware of the warmth in his chest.

Alistair was perhaps an idiot, and she drove Gared crazy with her lack of focus and inattention. But although he had chosen her for her charisma, to a select few he'd grudgingly admit that there was some truth behind the rumors.

At least, he'd think that—until Alistair offered to give him a boost onto his horse.