

Because Someone Will Come Back
A Second Age of Retha Short Story
By K. M. Shea

“I think that’s just about everything.” The Guildmistress rested her hands on her hips and peered up at the blue and gold stain glass window at the back of Milk Crown’s Guildzone.

Fame and Fortune kept their hands clasped in front of them and smiles on their faces as they eager awaited instructions.

It had been a busy week for the pair. Milk Crown had thrown a huge party—which the Guildmaster and Guildmistress had brought them to so they might store and then distribute various party favors and contest prizes throughout the several-day-long event.

After that Milk Crown members had returned to the guildzone and talked and laughed late into the night before leaving. Fame and Fortune recognized the Heroes had cried a lot during that last night. They didn’t understand why, but that was okay as long as they could see to their duties.

Besides, the Heroes *often* did things that didn’t make sense to the siblings: like wear clearly deficient armor or refrain from viewing the newest map packs.

Even now they didn’t quite grasp what the Guildmistress and Guildmaster were doing.

Unfortunately, since the late-night unexplained crying session, none of the Milk Crown members had returned to the Guildzone, so it seemed Fame and Fortune would have to wait for an explanation until someone dropped by.

The Guildmaster stared at the chalkboard placed by the entrance to the Guildzone. The chalkboard held a list of all Milk Crown members, as well as their position in the guild and their permissions setting.

“I still can’t believe everyone is leaving,” the Guildmaster said.

The Guildmistress sauntered across the hall and rested a hand on the Guildmaster’s shoulder. “It’s not surprising. A lot of them now have families, and of course there’s some people like Bryce who can’t play now out of conflict of interest.”

“Yeah, but I thought even if we went some of the younger players might stay,” the Guildmaster said. “Like Azarel.”

“With almost everyone leaving for professional or family life reasons, it wouldn’t be the same for her, or any of the other few Milk Crown members who didn’t have to leave,” the Guildmistress said.

“Of course, but they would have been welcomed into pretty much *any* guild they wanted,” the Guildmaster objected.

“Maybe, but there’s only one Milk Crown,” the Guildmistress said.

The Guildmaster hesitated, then agreed. “There’s only one Milk Crown.”

Fame fidgeted, bored with the discussion she didn’t quite grasp. “Do you understand what they’re talking about?”

Fortune kept his smile on and muttered out of the corner of his mouth. “It doesn’t matter. As long as they don’t have any tasks for us.”

“But they’ve been acting strange for a while.”

“Heroes are eccentric people. How else could you explain why they chose to enter that egg hunt in Luminos last year while all wearing white rabbit ears?”

The Guildmistress nudged the Guildmaster, reclaiming the NPCs’ attention. “You’re such a softy. It’s a good thing you have a sister like me to protect you,” she said.

“Hah!” the Guildmaster snorted. “As if you aren’t responsible for the majority of the fights and fiascos we’ve been involved in!”

The Guildmistress smiled, but didn’t object. “Are you ready?” She held out her hand.

“Yes.” The Guildmaster placed his palm on top of hers, and the two fell silent.

As Fame and Fortune watched, the writing on the chalkboard changed, altering the various standings of the guildmembers.

A trumpet sounded and a voice announced. “Guildmember Azarel has been promoted to Junior Officer.”

As the Guildmaster and Guildmistress went down the list, the trumpet and voice continued, announcing all the changes until *every* guildmember was now a junior officer.

As far as Fame and Fortune were concerned, this was merely another example of the strangeness of Heroes. They were unconcerned about it until the Guildmaster and Guildmistress turned away from the chalkboard and faced them.

“Fame, Fortune,” the Guildmistress said, her voice abnormally quiet. “We’re...going on a journey.”

“Excellent!” Fame beamed. “Are there any maps I can gather that would assist you?”

“No.” The Guildmistress swallowed loudly, but kept a smile on her lips. “Not this time.”

“It’s going to be a long journey,” the Guildmaster said. “And we don’t think we’ll be back.”

“Nonsense,” Fortune said. “Heroes are immortal! Death cannot keep you.”

“Yes,” the Guildmaster reluctantly agreed. “This time all the Milk Crown members are coming with us. And we don’t know if anyone will come back.”

“But we think they will,” the Guildmistress said. “We believe they will. And until then, I’d like you two to keep learning everything you can, and to have this place ready.”

The Guildmaster blinked back more unexplained tears. (He wasn’t even wounded! What was there to cry over?) “Yeah,” he said. “Keep it spotless. Because someday, someone will come back.”

“Thank you—both of you—for going with us.” The Guildmistress scooped Fame and Fortune into a hug, jabbing Fortune in the side with the hilt of her sword.

The Guildmaster joined her. “And thank you for all your service. When a Milk Crown member comes back, they’ll need you more than ever. Goodbye.”

They released Fame and Fortune, gazed around the room once more with glazed eyes, then left.

“Well.” Fortune blinked, studying the shut door. “What do you think that was about?”

“No idea,” Fame said. “But I’m going to gather some maps.”

“They said they didn’t need any.”

“That’s silly. *Everyone* needs maps.”

The NPC siblings wandered off, baffled, but pleased with their day’s work.

They didn’t think much of all the strangeness as a day passed and then another.

Days turned into weeks and weeks turned into months. A whole year passed, and still not a single Milk Crown member dropped by.

It was unfathomable.

Sometimes Guildmembers didn’t visit the zone for weeks, but a *whole year*?

But all they could do was carry on with their duties.

So Fame studied the new maps and monster manuals that were automatically delivered to the guild library whenever a new adventure was launched in Retha, and Fortune kept apprised of all equipment and weapons.

And one year turned into two, then three, then five, then ten.

They grew desperate.

The guildzone was quiet except for the NPC siblings, and they had been *created* to aid and help the Heroes of Milk Crown.

But there were no Heroes to aid. Only silence.

“I feel...*something*,” Fortune announced during one of the endless nights. “I think I understand why some guildmembers cried even though they were not injured.”

“Why haven’t they come back?” Fame asked. “They can’t have died—it’s impossible! Did we not perform our duties well enough?”

They were silent for several moments.

“The Guildmaster and Guildmistress said someday someone would come back,” Fortune finally said. “We will continue so when they do, we can properly welcome them.”

And still, time stretched on.

The boredom and emptiness were inescapable.

Until...

One day...they heard the entrance door swing open.

Fame had been sitting in the treasure room, watching Fortune take inventory *again*, when they felt the player enter.

The NPC siblings stared at each other.

“Someone’s here,” Fame dumbly said.

They lunged for the door, sprinted down the hall, and almost threw themselves down the staircase.

Several Heroes waited at the door, and Fame and Fortune didn’t immediately recognize them.

Fortune reached them first, and started standard protocol greetings. “Welcome to the guildzone for Milk Crown—ack!” Fortune managed to say before Fame rammed him from behind.

“How can I help you?” Fame smiled.

“Hi Fame. Hello Fortune,” said the strangest Hero of them all.

It was a female elf with pink hair and a patchwork of equipment matched with terribly underleveled fans that would have given Fortune nightmares on a good day.

But this garish elf stared at them with warm and familiar eyes.

Something deep in them echoed.

They had seen those eyes before, on a deadly but equally kind hearted Milk Crown echo of arcane who had in particular been the pride and joy of the Guildmaster due to her destructive power.

The duo broke protocol, broke their roles, and flung themselves at her. “Azarel!”

At last the emptiness was gone. It didn’t matter that her equipment was terrible. It didn’t matter that she looked different.

Just as the Guildmaster and Guildmistress had said, someone had come back.