

Disgust to Respect
A Second Age of Retha Short Story
By: K.M. Shea

It had taken Gared, Guildmaster of KOS, hours to convince Noir Nohealz4U to join the party of *Kitten Lovemuch*, the dancer who was also supposedly their only hope to make it out of Retha.

“She killed Malignus and *talked* to Eternal Chase staff. They authorized her to come back and help us get out,” Gared said.

“Doesn’t matter.” Noir drummed his fingers on the spindle-legged table he sat at. “I’m not going to be the heal slave of someone with a martyr-complex.”

“She doesn’t have a martyr-complex.” Gared glanced from Noir’s plate of honey slathered croissants to the beefy baker standing behind the counter. “Look, she doesn’t have a healer in her party, and you’re the best on the server right now. If we want to get out of here, we need to make it as easy as possible for her.”

“Why should she need the best? KOS has priests and clerics—send one of them,” Noir scoffed.

“Noir,” Gared’s voice was serious. “Please.”

Noir studied his...*maybe* friend. There was a wrinkle on Gared’s forehead that hadn’t been there before, and he rubbed his eyes with a kind of worry even Alistair couldn’t evoke in him.

“We’re in more trouble than we know—and not just because the game is busted,” Gared said. “If players start to lose it, things will go south real fast. Kit gives us something to rally around, and I believe in her. I’ve heard stories of her old guild. If she’s even half as good as the rumors said, she might be the only one who can make this happen.”

Noir sighed heavily. “Fine.” He stuffed a croissant in his mouth, almost humming over the taste. “But you owe me big.”

“If we make it through this, I won’t care,” Gared said. “Come on. Her party is assembling outside the Guildhall.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

When Noir finally set eyes on the supposed-savior-of-Retha, he regretted his decision.

She was a beautiful elf, but eccentric as she wore dancer armor—a class elves should *never* be—and had unusual pink hair and a terrible facial tattoo usually only given to players in a wizard class.

This? This is the hero Gared has been harping about?

“Hey there, Kit,” Gared smiled. “This is Noir—he’s a priest with the legendary class of holy oracle. That’s the top healing class in the game. He’s going to accompany you and serve as your personal healer on this journey,” he explained as Noir contemplated kicking him.

Gared had prepared him for the elf-dancer bit, but the pink hair and horrible wizard facial tattoo tipped the scale.

Not that it made much of a difference. Noir hated *most* players. Even before he knew what she looked like, Noir already felt unfavorably about Kitten Lovemuch, as he did with all players who needed healers.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Noir,” Kit said. “Hopefully you won’t have to do much during our trip.”

Noir critically eyed her. “Yeah, we’ll see about that.”

Noir’s suspicions were correct. He had to heal—and bless—Kit *a lot*. But not because she was an idiot. Rather it because Solus Miles appeared to be determined to get his pledged up to level cap.

But though he loathed to admit it...Gared was right about Kit.

She was different.

She thought differently and organized her party in different patterns Noir hadn’t seen—and he had been in *a lot* of fights and battles.

Best of all, she didn’t make Noir heal a player if they were being particularly stupid.

“Our healer didn’t heal!” Long Claw snarled as he joined the party, wading through the brimstone chimera bodies before they disappeared.

Noir rolled his eyes and opened his mouth to blast the werewolf with a response, but Kit beat him to it.

“You disobeyed orders and ran off into the middle of the pride when I specifically said to come back.” Though Kit spoke in a calm voice and smiled, Noir could see the spark of irritation in her eye. “If you decide to do your own thing, you aren’t going to get the benefit that comes with being part of a party that is working together. That goes for *everyone*.”

The tone of her voice allowed no room for argument. She was serious.

Noir smirked and scratched Trash Panda’s head as he studied Kit. Maybe he would have to revise his opinion of her....

Long Claw gaped at Kit’s turned back and tried to protest, but Kit brushed him off and herded the party on.

Noir would have pledged loyalty to her for that alone. Most party leaders were obsessed with keeping all their players alive, no matter how it strained their healer and encouraged their players to be increasingly reckless.

But being loyal and *liking* Kitten Lovemuch were two totally different things. So when Solus Miles forcibly dragged the party south to Kamoi, level-grinding the whole way, and Noir caught himself thinking it wasn’t a half-bad idea to get Kit some levels, he knew he was losing his mind.

“This is wretched,” Noir grumbled to himself. “The forest bulls smell bad and attract bugs, and there’s nothing I hate more than acting like a heal and buff slave! That must be what has me all weird and...*kind* thinking.”

“What was that, Noir?” Kit uncorked a potion bottle and raised it to her lips.

“I didn’t say anything,” Noir barked. “And don’t you *dare* drink that potion,” he snarled. “Heaven’s Hand!”

The heal settled over Kit, restoring her health.

“Thanks, Noir.” Kit made a face. As an elf she didn’t sweat as much, so her hair was still perfect and her skin pristine even though everyone else in the party was sweating like pigs. “I’m sorry about this. You didn’t sign up to join us on a level grind.”

Noir sniffed. “It’s fine. As long as you realize that.” He haughtily opened his mouth to inform Kit that she needed the levels anyway and this was nothing compared to a raid before he caught the thought in his mouth and clamped his jaw shut so tight his teeth clicked.

I’m losing my edge and my mind. Or maybe I’m growing senile as the game overheats my brain.

Kit patted Trash Panda's head, then threw herself back into a dance as Solus Miles summoned more monsters for the party to fight.

Sometime between then and making nice with the pirates, Noir was forced to reckon with the idea that he had possibly come to *respect* the pink haired elf-dancer.

It wasn't as bitter of a pill to swallow as he would have thought.

Her character design was terrible, but Noir was coming to like it because it offended *everyone*, which was in general a recipe for a good time.

And it wasn't really *just* Kit. Other members of the party had proven themselves as well. (This made Noir utterly uncomfortable as he wasn't used to liking more than a handful of people total, much less a handful of people who all hung out together. He planned to later blame it on the comradery that life-and-death-situations caused.)

Yes. That has to be why.

Noir glanced over at Kit, who was leaning against the railing of the pirate ship as they sailed upriver, heading for Elba. She was adjusting her rakish pirate hat. She took it off for a moment and studied the fancy feathers fixed to the brim, then not-so-secretly stared at the wings of her pet celestial being.

"Do not *think* of it," Pax hissed, apparently his AI was starting to accurately predict Kit's eccentric actions.

"You're strange," Noir blurted out.

Kit fiddled with a lock of her pink hair and scratched the bare patch of her belly that her pirate-themed armor displayed. "You don't say?" Her pleasant voice was crusted with only the slightest edge of sarcasm.

"It's a good strange." Noir propped his elbows on the rail. "I hate everyone. But you...you're not so bad."

Kit smiled broadly. "Thanks, Noir."

Even the fact that she *knew* that had been a compliment just proved Noir's point.

Kit aka Kitten Lovemuch was one of the most unique players in Retha at the moment.

And maybe Gared was right.

Maybe she *was* good enough to get them out.

But what shocked Noir the most was realizing it didn't matter if she did.

In this time of danger and upheaval, Kit had offered Noir friendship—even though he was cranky, combative, and loved to complain. And her friends had followed her lead in this way and a million others.

That was why Noir stood with her when they fought goblins and bobokin invaders in Elba's harbors.

And if he was being honest—which, *why* would he ever be that?—it was also why Noir joined her terribly named guild.

Because if he was going to have a guildleader, it was going to be someone he respected. And though he admired Gared and Solus Miles, there was no one quite like Kit.

No one else in Noir's acquaintance had ever turned his disgust to respect.