

KITCHEN PORTAL

Original story

by **Ometo**

*Original characters by **Ometo and Sakara***

August 2023

<https://www.furaffinity.net/user/ometochtli>

<https://www.furaffinity.net/user/metrofox2>

Afitael was really starting to feel upset about the whole affair. She, as the royal manor's cook, usually worked alone in the kitchen during the morning hours while her kitchen boy—or girl (they changed almost every year anyway, and Afitael seldom bothered to remember their names) went for provisions to the town market in Gazamolt, one league away, or performed various chores such as the ever-popular potato peeling session.

The young beech marten enjoyed the calm of the semi-basement room. She loved it when the sun rays came through the large windows, warming her fur, reflecting on an impressive set of copper pans, all while her delicately spiced stew simmered in an old wrought iron casserole. She was, so to speak, the mistress of her own kingdom, and no one dared to bother her.

But now? there were three people in her kitchen! People that, granted, weren't complete strangers, but weren't exactly repeat visitors either. It felt like an invasion. Disgusting.

All that commotion because of some stain! She had called it a stain for lack of a better term. It had appeared six days earlier on the whitewashed wall, near the ironing board, about two feet from the floor. It had the shape of a ring, with fuzzy edges, its colour oscillating between blue-grey, lichen green, brown and black.

Originally it was no bigger than her paw, but it grew larger every day at an almost frightening pace. *Fungus invasion*, she had thought at first. What a bloody nuisance! Better get rid of that as quick as possible. She had rubbed the stain with a soft cloth, with a sponge, then with a horsehair brush. She had used soap, bleach, sodium bicarbonate, ammonia, formic acid, everything she had; to no avail. The stain had grown, day after day, and it now formed a whole disc about thirty inches in diameter, partially extending on the terracotta floor. It looked as if an insane painter had let his palette full of gloomy colours fall on the usually pristine kitchen floor.

The proud Afitael, in eight years of service, had never suffered such an offence. Reluctantly, not wanting to look helpless or clueless, she had asked for help. Buka, the manor handyman, a gruff, taciturn wolverine of indeterminate age, had come first. He had provided the formic acid vat and other more or less perilous detergents. Now he was standing, arms crossed, as if his look of intense disapproval was enough to make the stain disappear.

Then had come Mr. Beretra, an always courteous and friendly old chamois who had been the King's butler for decades. He rarely ever entered the kitchen, leaving it to the beech marten's good care, and spent most of the day in the upper

floors, catering to the daily needs of the monarch and his Lady. Like all servants of the manor, he wore a saffron scarf, tied at the waist, and looked as perplex and discouraged as the others. He had phoned a few acquaintances on Wantael Island and even abroad, asking (in vain) for useful advice.

Finally, there was that pine marten, the Captain of the Guard. Always stern and all, Afitael thought. Looking like she could murder you with her little finger alone. The boys—especially the ever-talkative Taray, who visited the cook almost every morning once his guard duty was over—used to say she was “tough but fair”. She and Afitael superficially looked like each other: both were somewhat petite women, and yet stronger than they appeared. Both had bright, lively eyes and a short, soft and glossy fur. (As a beech marten, though, Afitael's fur was of a lighter brown, and her throat patch was white instead of yellow.)

Captain Soist was also ten years older than her, and more experienced. She knelt, like the others, examined the stain closely, smelled it, gently rubbed the hexagonal terracotta tiles.

She stayed there one minute or two, motionless, lost in her thoughts. Then she stood up.

“Well. It seems clear now we are not dealing with organic life, or some sort of chemical reaction. Since no detergent managed to alter it in the slightest manner, we must assume we are dealing with a physical phenomenon.” She sighed, adding in a soft voice: “Of what nature exactly, I don't know.”

The captain then turned towards the butler.

“Mr. Beretra, do you perchance know Mr. Mikiya? A badger. Middle-aged, always wearing a grey lab coat. Teaches physics and mathematics at the Superior School in Gazamolt. Would you be kind enough to ask him to come here? We'd

need a few of his laboratory instruments. A magnetometer, a bolometer—perhaps a Geiger counter, too. Anything we can muster. We need to evaluate whether this... anomaly is a potential danger or not.

“Ah, the old Mikiya!” Mr. Beretra replied with a discrete smile, as if an enormous weight had been lifted off his shoulders. “Yes, of course, I know him, we were schoolmates. I shall phone him right away.

“Very well”, the captain said. “Just tell me once you've contacted him. Now I have to inform the King about the situation. Oh, and you two...”

The marten turned towards Afitael and Buka, who had remained quiet.

“I want absolute silence on the matter”, she said. “Is that clear? This thing here (she pointed at the stain) is officially fungus. Nothing more. We will treat it as such. Don't touch it, don't walk on it, keep working as if nothing happened. This may be a matter of national security. Understood?”

“So? Did the inspection reveal anything?”

The old king, Elman VI, was sitting on a red velvet armchair in the middle of the manor's parlour. It was now past midnight. The vast room was dimly lit, and the television set in its opposite corner, only displaying a test card, projected its bluish glare on the dark oak joists of the ceiling.

“Nothing too remarkable”, the captain answered. “We only noticed slightly elevated radiation around the stain... well, I mean, the anomaly. Nothing unusual, perhaps. Higher concentrations of radon gas in semi-basements should be expected in a granite-rich area such as Wantael Island.”

“Hmm. That preoccupies me. Frankly, I dislike the idea of potentially exposing my servants, my guard and my wife to danger, whatever it is.” The king paused for a second. “Nevertheless, I acknowledge we might have to inform the government about this, sooner or later.”

“I am afraid we might have to, yes.”

“Well!” Elman VI pensively rubbed his abundant cheek fur and stretched his legs. “I might just as well see what this anomaly looks like, yes? After all, I don't often visit my own kitchen, do I!”

“Of course”, Captain Soist replied with a brief smile. “Let us see.”

The anomaly had changed again since Afitael had left the kitchen and turned off the stove, slightly after dinner. Its size had more or less stabilized, but its aspect was different now. The blotches of various colours that composed it were less fuzzy; their edges looked sharper. And yet, they seemed to flutter, oscillating like leaves under a gentle breeze. The colours too had changed: they were more varied, more vibrant.

“Looks like a Lentekan forest in the midst of summer”, the king pointed out.

The comparison struck Captain Soist. It did look like a forest landscape! But it was blurry, as seen through a sheet of cathedral glass. Like watching through the viewfinder of a camera, the subject wholly out of focus but still recognizable.

The marten felt fresh air on her muzzle. Her whiskers quivered.

“Is it just me, or is this kitchen draftier than usual?”, she muttered.

“No. I can feel it as well”, the king said. “Look around us: all doors and windows are closed.” He raised his left palm, facing the anomaly. “Couldn't it come from... over there?” His right index finger pointed at the artifact.

“But that's...!” The captain stopped abruptly. Impossible. Perhaps she had to put that word aside. There was no obvious scientific explanation for that object. It had to be thoroughly investigated, even if its appearance couldn't be explained by rational means.

The mustelid sighed. “Let me see. Stay where you are, Sir.”

She made a few steps towards the coloured patch on the wall. Then she knelt, palpating the affected area.

Her right arm went through the ground, up to the elbow. She stepped back in alarm.

“What the...!”

“Are you alright?”, the worried king asked.

“I..” She touched her forearm in disbelief, as if it had suddenly turned to stone. “I think I am.”

She turned to the old lynx with a grim smile. “Sir, I am sorry to inform you that the terracotta tiles of your royal kitchen now have the consistency of molten cheese.”

“Blimey!” Elman VI's white whiskers were shivering with concern—and excitement. “I do hope my whole manor doesn't turn into molten cheese, too.”

“The anomaly's size is now stable, so I hope it won't”, the mustelid remarked. Let's hope it stays this way. If not, we may have to evacuate the whole...”

A high-pitched whistling sound interrupted her. It came from the anomaly, which started to waver like a banner during a storm. And, within seconds, like a blurry picture turning into a sharp, well-defined image, the coloured patch turned—confirming King Elman's intuition—into a genuine landscape: a large clearing in the middle of a beautiful Nordic forest. Spruces, firs, larches and pines stretched their dark green branches in the background. A little closer, birches deployed their elegant white bark and their light foliage above the high grass. Hemlocks, goldenrods, heathers and loosestrifes, periwinkles and mallows, cornflowers and poppies, with their bright colours, added a note of gaiety in the landscape. One could only see a small part of the sky above the conifers—but it was likely early summer, as on Wantael Island.

The king and the captain slowly, cautiously approached the anomaly. It was like an extra-large colour television screen, incrustated into the kitchen's wall, showing amazingly sharp pictures of a remote nation—only perturbed from time

to time by faint blue-green ripples. They could hear birds singing, but the loudest one was a green woodpecker calling for a mate. His hysterical, yet familiar snicker comforted the two Wantaelians.

“A gate to another world”, the king said. He and Captain Soist felt the summer wind blowing on their faces.

“I should be concerned with bacterial or viral contamination, if it is the case”, the marten remarked. “Oh well. It seems safe enough for now. It is very relaxing to see, don't you think.”

“It is”, the king replied. “Reminds me of the forests in North Faltawenza Province, where we were stationed in the first weeks of the Sixth Fent War—before Hell broke loose. A long time ago. We had the northern lights there, you know!”

They spent a few minutes in silence, contemplating the landscape.

“Still, we should take additional security measures”, the captain said. “Most importantly, close down that kitchen. We possibly can't let Afitael work there. Could be dangerous. And, you know how she is. That young lady can't keep her tongue still, can she?”

“Ah ah! This is true. She is a mighty fine cook, though. Good. You are right, of course: Afitael and her kitchen aide will get paid leave until further notice, and I will personally make sure they keep their mouths shut. I shall also ask the Beretras to contact the caterer in Gazamolt.” Elman VI rubbed the white fur of his chin. “We can't starve because of some paranormal phenomenon, I guess!”

“I will stay here to monitor the anomaly, then. Don't tell anyone exce—
LOOK!”

Something had moved in the distance, far into the Nordic landscape. The old lynx had seen it, too. Birds, bugs and plants were not the only denizens of this idyllic forest, after all! Far in the distance, people were slowly coming out of the forest. There were perhaps two dozens of them, of varied species: foxes, some mustelids, an old otter, a couple of black lynxes... and what appeared to be a young black wolf, his tail wrapped in a strange leather sheath, making great gestures, seemingly bossing around the rest of the group.

Fascinated, the king and the captain watched the scene. Almost a half-period* passed. It seemed like the small tribe was settling near a stream. Someone had made a fire. Others were busy setting up some sort of primitive tent, using wooden poles and animal hides. Seven or eight individuals were wading into the cold waters of the stream with nets, harpoons and wicker creels, probably looking for salmons, perches and crayfish.

“Primitives. People from the earliest days of the Continent of Tawa”, the captain said. “But that way of life disappeared thousands of years ago! They know nothing about agriculture, I suppose. They're...”

“Hunters-gatherers. I believe that's the word you were looking for. Perhaps they still exist somewhere on the Antipodean Continent, we can't know for sure.” (Elman VI's golden brown eyes glittered with excitement.) “Primitive people, no question about that. But how crafty they are! Look at their flint axes, their bone harpoons, their fishing nets, their jewels. I could wear buckskin leggings like that”, the old lynx joked. “I assume they would be quite comfy!”

“They seem clever enough, I agree. But look at this young fellow.”

The captain pointed at a young fox who, after helping the tent builders and spending some time communicating through gestures with a cranky-looking old

otter, had slowly drifted away from the tribe. He was perhaps ten or eleven years old; a scrawny young fox, but one that looked healthy and happy enough. He wore a loincloth, buckskin leggings, and a necklace made of bone or a similar material.

What concerned the captain most was the fact that the young lad had a sling. She knew what damage slings could do in expert hands.

Now he was walking straight towards the two observers.

“I suggest you get out of this room, Sir”, the mustelid whispered. “This situation could quickly get out of hand.”

“Nonsense”, the king grumbled. “I fought in two continental wars, on both sides. I survived trench warfare. Do you think a sling scares an old cat like me? We will face this situation together. Both of us are warriors, don't forget it.”

“You are right, as always. We will see, then.”

The fox boy was now very close, about twenty feet in front of the observers and fifteen feet below them. He had bright blue eyes, the captain noticed—an unusual colour for a red fox. She wondered whether he could hear them, see them or smell them. (At the moment, the wind was blowing towards them, which made that last hypothesis less likely.)

The boy bent down. Picked up a lump of dried earth at his feet. Then threw it right between the two Wantaelians.

The lump crashed against a large copper jam pan, making a resounding noise. DONG.

The boy looked in silence towards the captain and the king for two or three minutes which seemed like an eternity. Then he turned his back and left.

Four more days had elapsed. The time was 3,05** and Lani the roecon***, like his mate Taray, had just finished his morning sentry duty. The genet had gone downstairs to the guards' room, where he would play a game of Black and Reds with his comrade Samimi while Lani, who had accompanied him, would get back to their bedroom, make a nap and perhaps read a few pages of the *Grammar of the Wantaelian dialect of Common Tarwan* before lunchtime.

Captain Soist's head popped through the thick oak door that lead to the manor's garden.

“Wazdeleba! Kunesta!

The startled guards turned to her and saluted, their right fist clenched over the heart.

“Please report to my office. At once.

The two guards glanced at each other, then followed the pine marten without a word, leaving a safe distance between them and the sharp-eared captain.

“I told you we shouldn't have stayed so late at the Merry Octopus!”, Lani whispered while they were walking around the retaining wall to reach the Red Pavilion.

“Come on! The cider and *layaks* and the music were so good”, replied the ever-confident genet. “Besides, neither Samimi or Nami wouldn't rat us out. You know it.

“It's Takat I don't trust.

“He's an arse, but not that much. Everything will be fine.” The genet wrapped his tail around his friend's leg to comfort him.

The captain sat at her office while the two guards saluted again.

“At ease. Sit down.”

They complied.

There was an odd look of embarrassment over the captain's face. She was always in control!

“Gentlemen. We are going out on an expedition.”

Lani and Taray looked at each other.

“Is the King leaving for a trip?” Lani asked.

“No”, the captain said. “The King and his Lady are staying here. We three are leaving.”

“How long will we be away?” asked Taray, who already had an appointment with a very open-minded young woman on Redday night.

“Just a few hours. Two or three days at most. Gendarmes will replace us while we're out. Look...” (The captain stretched her arms over the desk.) “Some kind of unexplained physical phenomenon happened here a few days ago. In the manor's kitchen.” (Lani's eyes opened wide, while Taray squinted like a cat chasing a mouse.) “We need to assess if it represents a threat to the royal family, or the island, or even the entire world, and I need you for that vital task.”

“What...” blurted Lani, thinking as fast as he could. “What sort of, uh, physical phenomenon are we talking about, ma'am?”

“It's... It looks like a gate. A passage to another world, perhaps another time and place. Which ones, we don't know yet, but it seems fairly similar to ours so far.

“So an interdimensional portal?”

“Always an avid science-fiction reader, aren't we, Kunesta”, Captain Soist replied with an ironic but complicit grin. “Yes, I suppose we could call it that.”

The genet hadn't said a word, but he too was thinking. That was why Afitael had become so reclusive! Taray and her used to share an intimate moment together in the kitchen when Lani wasn't in the mood for that. “I need your sauce to make mine”, she said. She was usually so open and talkative!

The food had changed, too. The chicken in a hazelnut sauce they had yesterday evening was excellent, he acknowledged, no complains—it was simply not hers.

“Is that alien world... inhabited? the genet asked.

“It is. We made sure of that. I personally observed them for three full days. Sentient bipeds, fairly similar to us. Primitive technology, hunters-gatherers. Diverse species, so at least we know it's not the Antipodean Continent. (Lani had an inner sigh of relief.) Well...” The captain stood up. “You'd better see it by yourselves. Oh, and don't forget those two heavy packages behind. We will need some hardware down there.”

“Well, it's there.”

The captain had just opened the kitchen's door. The portal was still gaping. Dusk was approaching inside it, and the sunset projected its soft pink light on the kitchen's cookware on the opposite wall.

Taray's child-like enthusiasm made him giddy.

“Can't wait to do some camping!”

He looked downward through the gate. The tribe Captain Soist had mentioned earlier was still there in the distance, about five hundred feet ahead, stationing on the other side of the clearing.

“Can they see us?” Lani asked.

“I believe they can't”, the marten replied. “Except for that one kid, perhaps. Scrawny red fox, blue eyes. Inquisitive little guy. You'll recognize him. He has a sling and seems to be skilled with it, so be cautious. Just in case.”

She took a rope ladder from one of the heavy packages and attached it to a solid wrought iron ring, anchored to one of the kitchen's wall, where Afitael usually hanged her clean dish towels. Then she threw the ladder through the gate. The guards heard it drop on the clearing's ground, fifteen feet below.

“Now listen to me carefully. Our lives might depend on it.” (The boys listened intently, their eyes shining with curiosity.) “Wazdeleba. Your stealth is one of your strengths, so you will be our scout there. Explore the surroundings, see if there are any other groups around. Observe that tribe as much as you can, but do not contact them until I tell you to. Ideally they should come to us, not the opposite. They seem like curious, peaceful folks but if they show any signs of aggressive behaviour, back off! We've got a few tear gas canisters to fend them off

if things turn wrong.” (The marten didn't mention the revolver she always carried with her but, while she was ready to use it to defend her men and herself, she was almost certain she wouldn't have to.) “We can always climb back to safety if those prehistoric folks get too unfriendly.”

The genet nodded in agreement. Then the captain turned towards Lani:

“Kunesta, you will act as our scientific officer. You will stay close to me as much as you can. There are several instruments for you in that other package. Twin-lens reflex camera, telescope, microscope and loupe, lots of stuff. Your objective will be to study local wildlife, make astronomical observations and assess whether we're still on our planet, or if it is a whole different world, and determine whether any of the local organisms may be harmful to us. Air has been flowing from that world to this kitchen for four days, so we'd know by then if it was poisonous, but obviously we don't know much more about that place. Don't think we will need chemsuits, but erring on the side of caution can't hurt.”

Lani nodded too. He was still tense about the idea of exploring an unknown world, and even worse, being potentially trapped inside it, but the captain's plan seemed rational and prudent enough. She was a brave and resourceful woman, and he knew—whatever happened—she would never abandon them.

“Additionally, your linguistic skills and knowledge of culture and history will be of some use. We will have to communicate with that tribe at some point, so you will be our linguist as well. There is a sound-on-film recorder in that other package, so make good use of it. Any questions?”

“No, ma'am. It's quite clear—even though it's quite mysterious, of course”, Lani said with a shy smile. But—

“Just one question, ma'am”, Taray interrupted. You mentioned chemsuits. Shouldn't we, uh... you know... (he pointed at his headgear and at the intricate goldwork on his uniform) leave those gaudy dress uniforms here and put our camos on instead? That would be more convenient. I mean, I can be stealthy to some extent, but not that much with that red pompom and shiny bronze ornaments over my head.”

The captain smiled. She didn't regret choosing the two youngest members of her guard for that expedition. They were so candid!

“Actually this is a very good remark, Wazdeleba. I pondered the question and theoretically, you're right. Yes, camos would be more convenient. But we will keep those, as you say, gaudy uniforms regardless. And do you know why, Taray Wazdeleba? (She observed a melodramatic pause, then raised her voice.) Because this is not just a scientific expedition. This is no damn field trip. This is a *diplomatic* trip. We will be representing Wantael Island down there. Not just our island, but our entire planet. No time to screw around. This is a unique event. We must look *sharp!* (Now she was almost shouting. The marten hit the nearby table with her clenched fist, startling Lani.) *Impress* those savages with our superior technology, weaponry and sense of dress. To the hell with convenience! You may remove your kepi and your vest while you're scouting, and that's all, Wazdeleba. I want pomp. And dignity, as much as local conditions will allow it. We owe that to our nation, the proud Wantael Island, and to those prehistoric men we are about to make first contact with. You are the sons of proud sea raiders, not wusses. Do I make myself clear?

“Yes, ma'am!” (The two boys saluted spontaneously.)

“At ease, you fools.” (The captain sighed in relief.) “We may go, then. But first, the packages.”

Slowly, cautiously, the two guards and the captain took the two heavy boxes, wrapped in rough, undyed hemp fabric, secured them with ropes and lowered them through the enigmatic portal. One, two. The instruments were safe, waiting for them on the alien world.

“My turn. Wazdeleba then, Kunesta will come last. Someone will come here every 100 minutes to keep contact with us, so check your watches, gentlemen.”

The three soldiers took their fob watches from their vest's inner pocket and verified that they were adequately synchronized.

“Nightfall has come down there”, the captain said in a low voice. “I guess our first contact with an unknown civilization will be for tomorrow.”

The pine marten went down the rope ladder until the white pompom of her kepi disappeared. Lani and Taray heard her set foot on the ground.

“Next one!” she whispered.

Then came Taray's turn. The viverrid wrapped his long, bushy tail around his own body so it wouldn't get in the way, then went down the ladder. As Lani knelt to hold the rope in place, his mate licked the roecoon's muzzle, muttering:

“Love you, *raebuck*.”

* 45 minutes.

** 9.05 am.

*** Roecoon: roe deer-raccoon hybrid.