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VELVET PAW *of* ASQUITH NOVELS

*Hotel Scenes*



THOMAS CORFIELD

# THE VELVET PAW OF ASQUITH NOVELS



## HOTEL SCENES

THOMAS CORFIELD



Panda Books Australia  
Sydney – New York – Tokyo – Berlin

“Corfield is a writer who ought to have his poetic licence revoked.”

—*Heidi Maitland, Hard but Fair.*

“Each word has been chosen with no regard for those preceding.”

—*Sorbet Flamm, Highly controversial in a traditional sense.*

“Finally, a reason to encourage illiteracy.”

—*Debbie Stott, Single Minded Mutli-tasker.*

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# LICENCE NOTES

Written in Australian English.

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If you enjoyed this book, then there's something wrong with you. Find a mirror, have a good, hard look at yourself and try to determine what it might be. Asking family members directly can be useful, as can total strangers after recounting a brief synopsis of your life. The latter can, however, result in prosecution, which might go some way to obtaining a differential diagnosis via expert witnesses.

Read the other Dooven Books.

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## ABOUT THE BOOKS

Consider a world inhabited with only cats and dogs: a society recognizable as our own, but with its eccentricities being the norm, rather than the exception. A world where the charm of Kenneth Grahame's *Wind In the Willows* meets the exotic world of Ian Fleming's *Bond*. A world where fluffy just got dangerous. These are the *Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels*, also known as the *Dooven Books*.

Welcome to the genre of *New Fable*.

The books follow *Oscar Teabag-Dooven*, a secret agent who believes he's more a poet than a spy, in a series of international, jet-setting adventures involving greed, espionage and the odd foray into professional cheese-shaping. Unfolding with a gratuitousness only possible in a world unrestrained by conventional society, the *Velvet Paw of Asquith novels* take the word mystery far too literally, and the word intrigue not literally enough.

Despite finding training to be brash and clinical, with too much shouting and not enough singing, *Oscar* battles villains and tries thwarting their garish plans. But it isn't easy when unable to do much more than rhyme one lot of words with another. Nevertheless, he succeeds with the help of the characters he meets and a courage that arises the moment he believes it cannot.

This ebook is accompanied by a *Cinematic Audiobook* production, which can be found at all good online audiobook retailers and podcast sites, unless it's not there.

## FORWARD

One of the recurring themes in the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels are their absurd hotel scenes. There are lots of hotels in the Velvet Paw of Asquith novels, because their adventures are international and quite tiring. Whether it be irritating concierges, snobby waiters or patrons hard pressed to determine whether the dining rooms' meals are chicken or fish, the hotel scenes have become iconic in the Dooven Books. Here then, is a collection of such scenes for your digestion. It includes excerpts from the not-yet-released Morrigan Trilogy: the fourth, fifth and sixth books, and gives readers a taste of what is yet to come—which is, frankly, even more ridiculous than what occurs in the first three books. If you like what follows, then it's recommended that you seek medical help, as you're clearly as confused as the author, who was recently diagnosed with psychoenteritis and locked up in the sort of room that might be best described as a cupboard.

Thomas Corfield.

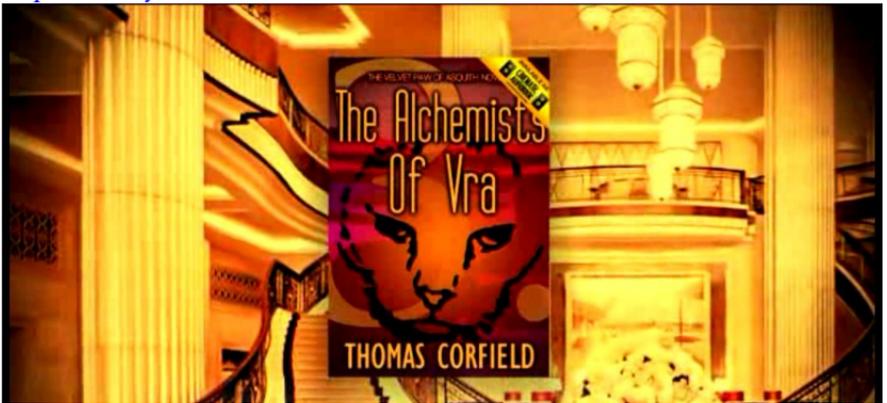
Now living exclusively in the third person for various legal reasons.

## SOME RELEVANT LINKS

The Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels are representative of the emerging New Fable fiction genre. Consider visiting the following links to find out more about both.

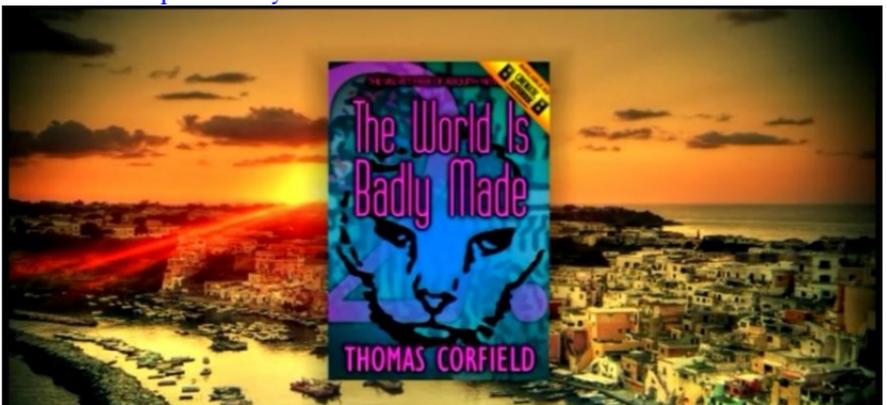
1. Hotel Scenes from the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels on Youtube:

<http://bit.ly/2fNekv9>

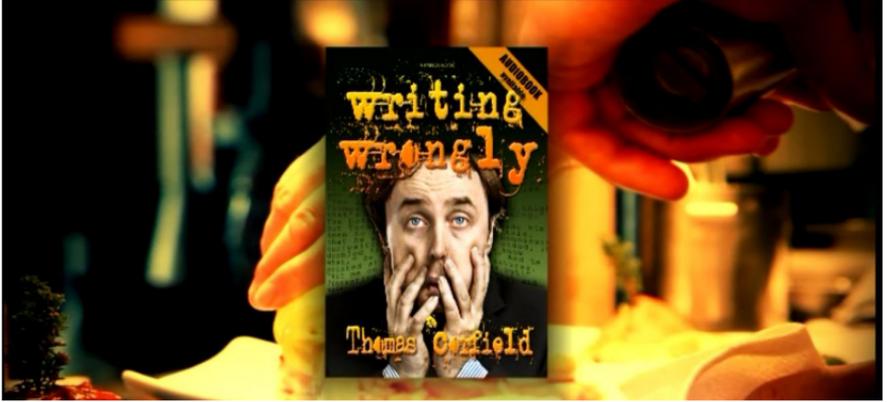


2. Chosen Chapters from the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels on

Youtube: <http://bit.ly/2fmCbBr>



3. Writing Wrongly – The Middle Bits, a book about writing the Dooven Books, on Youtube: <http://bit.ly/2ggF1qB> (contains adult themes)



4. The Velvet Paw of Asquith Facebook page:  
<https://www.facebook.com/doovenbooks>

5. A bit about the author:  
<http://www.thomascorfield.com/>

6. Dooven Muzak is music written exclusively for the Velvet Paw of Asquith Novels, the books referred to in this one. Listen to some here:  
<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/dooven-muzak>



# DOOVEN MUZAK - volume 5



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# DOOVENISM

The Velvet Paw of Asquith novels, aka the Dooven Books, are complemented with additional media to enhance the reader's experience. Visit [VELVETPAWOFASQUITH.COM](http://VELVETPAWOFASQUITH.COM) to learn more about these additional components of the Dooven Books:



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**EXTRACTIONISM**<sup>TM</sup>  
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# DEDICATION

For me, mainly.

## CHAPTER 1

### From The Purging of Ruen, Chapter 13

---

*In which Oscar returns from a day of traipsing around the beautiful seaside city of Ruen, only to find the hotel he's been staying at has been cordoned off in preparation for an exclusive dinner for the city's councillors.*

OSCAR frowned at a sign in Hotel d'Ruen's foyer. It was not a complicated or confusing sign. It had only six words, and three of them were one syllable. After a day of wandering around He frowned because he was thinking about things that were complicated: his bizarre conversation with a cyclopic dog, and a freak encounter with a manure-smearing cat. The former hinted at something unruly brewing, while the latter provided an illustrated example.

The sign wasn't helping him understand either.

Which only highlighted his day's frustration.

He'd spent most of it perusing cafés, all of which made excellent hot-fin, but had offered no further curiosities. In them, he'd deliberated his options, which ultimately revolved around perusing more cafés. He'd asked waiters about pooh-smearing animals and nasty things brewing, which they assumed were references to their cafés. As a result, he'd been thrown out of them, which was another reason for the number of cafés frequented.

After a day unconstructive and indiscrete, Oscar was left convinced he was about as useful as a bucket with no bottom, and he failed to recall any Catacomb's training regarding bottomless buck-

ets. The manure-scrawling had been rinsed away and its author was about as famous as one of his poems. Were it not for the audience who'd seen the graffiti, he might have dismissed the encounter as dream. Moreover, a day spent wandering through the city had revealed nothing to illustrate Horace's concerns either. Indeed, Ruen seemed wonderful, particularly if one aspired to being thrown from cafés. He sighed, feeling to have pieces of puzzle from two completely different puzzles. He was keen to throw them back in their boxes and go home. But he was on *curiosa*, so he couldn't. And anyway, he didn't have the boxes either.

Instead, he continued glowering at the sign.

He wondered whether Horace's offer of ear-consolation might elucidate more clues, but felt the dog had already divulged more than intended. Perhaps he could admit to being a Velvet Paw of Asquith. But because that would be about as discreet as wiping faeces on a wall, he refrained. Disheartened, he realised that tomorrow he'd probably just peruse more cafés.

He read the sign again.

*Dining Room Closed For Private Function.*

He scowled. It might as well be referring to his competence, except that he hadn't any. After a day of being useless, he'd been looking forward to another excellent meal of food to compensate.

"Are you having trouble with it, sir?" a staff member asked.

"I'm sorry?"

"The sign," the animal said, pointing at it. "Are you having trouble with any part of it in particular?"

"Trouble?"

"Yes. It's just that you've been staring at it for some time, and I was wondering what bit of it you were struggling with."

"I am not struggling with any of it, thank you," Oscar said, not in the mood for convivial hoteliers. "Not with the sign, anyway."

"Are you certain? You've been looking at it for quite some time."

"I was thinking about something else."

“In relation to the sign?”

“What?”

“Were your thoughts in relation to the sign, perhaps?”

“Are you trying to be annoying?”

“No, not at all,” the animal assured him. “It’s my job to ensure that things at Hotel d’Ruen run smoothly. Here, let me help you.” He proceeded to read the sign aloud, stopping at each word and peering at Oscar to ensure he understood.

“I can read perfectly well,” Oscar said. “I’m just disappointed that I can’t dine here tonight.”

“So your thoughts were in relation to the sign?”

“No,” said Oscar patiently. “The comment was an adjunct to your recital, not an explanation for its need.”

The animal blinked at him.

Fed up, Oscar said, “One of those words is very badly misspelt. Can you tell which one?”

When the animal turned and perused the sign, Oscar fluffed his pantaloons in annoyance and strode to the lift. After it pinged, he got in and rose two floors to alight no more appeased. He trudged along the hallway, muttering things about signs that are muttered for a reason. Inside his room, he stood bereft of ideas, finding again that peculiar limbo of arrival even more than he’d found upon arrival. He wandered to the window and slumped his chin upon a paw. Purple shadows of evening had grown long, and beneath them, couples strolled along the foreshore. Waves crashed in thump and hissed in retreat, leaving him to find that strange relief from immediacy that dozing affords.

*Encumbered and shackled I’m weary in wait,  
Afternoon spent in a peculiar state,  
For betwixt the hours I did try to discern,  
Yet arrive home with nothing, for nil have I earnt.*

The verse took him by surprise, and when he tried recollecting

its stanza, he was unable to. Not that it mattered, as he had little inclination to write it down.

Outside, faint blue strobes began lighting darkness, growing brighter until becoming a distinct flashing. He stared out the window to see police cars arrive and mount the pavement. From them, officers alighted. Some hurried to cordon off the street, while others ran around in circles, lapping the vehicles they'd arrived in. It was peculiar behaviour, and he watched intrigued until there was a knock at his door.

Opening it, he was greeted by two police officers.

Both of them stared at the top of his head.

"Are you alone, sir?" one asked it.

Oscar nodded.

"May we peruse you room for reasons of security?"

"I'm sorry, what?"

"Your room," the second one said, still intrigued with his head.

"May we peruse it for reasons of security?"

Indignant at having his missing ears addressed, Oscar said, "In what way could repeating the question possibly serve as explanation?"

"What?"

He folded his paws. "If it is apparent that I have no idea what you're talking about," he said, "how can asking the same question after rearranging two of its words possibly improve my chances of grasping it?"

The officers glanced at each other, doubting that hotel security sweeps involved giving comprehension lessons to strange cats with peculiar heads.

"We were being polite," the first said.

"What?" said Oscar, wondering if this might go on all night.

"We were being polite. It was made to sound like a request even though it wasn't one."

"Oh."

"Now get out of our way so we can search your room."

They were big and strong, so Oscar stepped aside. They checked his room very badly; under the mattress and behind the curtains, with one taking far too long perusing a waste paper basket considering it was empty. He watched them with growing bewilderment, convinced that having no crime to fight left them in dire need of some. When he asked what all the fuss was about, they explained that the hotel was hosting an important private function and that they had to check for things. Waste paper, presumably. When enquiring who the guests were, he was told that it was none of his business, which Oscar advised was the premise behind asking. The officers, however, didn't care. When their search was complete, despite it being nothing of the sort, they thanked his missing ears and left.

Intrigued, Oscar decided to have a look downstairs. He fluffed his pantaloons and donned a smart blue scarf, before attempting to spike his fur into makeshift ears. The mirror suggested it worked on one side, though only from a distance provided he didn't turn his head. But because it was impossible to get the spikes symmetrical, he was left looking even more bizarre than when earless. He sighed, flattened his fur and wondered whether he should wear a sign that read *I know*.

When he arrived downstairs, the dining room had been cordoned off, as had half the foyer, and guests were being forced to leave in a manner bordering on deportation. Apart from a cluster of staff leafing through dictionaries beside the sign, the place no longer looked like a hotel foyer and instead resembled one of the early rehearsals for *What The Hell Are We Doing—The Musical*. Caught in the tide of extradition, Oscar was hustled from the place to discover that things were even worse outside. Rather than a coordinated security sweep, it was more an over-reaction of astonishing proportions which left him staring with a sort of clinical disbelief.

Police were everywhere.

Their cars, flashing and bleating, filled the street. Between them, officers hurried, escorting guests and spectators in a manner that was clearly non-negotiable. Police vans arrived and squeezed

between police cars until side-mirrors broke and doors became wedged, which forced those in them to extricate themselves through windows. A lamp post was backed into, and fell onto a van, the driver of which began sobbing when unable to release her seatbelt. Several officers went to her aid, some of which became overwhelmed themselves and accompanied her wails with an admirable chorus of their own.

Oscar was pushed aside when police hurried up the steps with masses of cordoning tape and unrolled the stuff in a manner suggesting they intended to mummify the place. Several tried cordoning anything they could get their paws on, which included each other, resulting in some of the more severely tangled being forced to congregate on the pavement and wait for scissors. He was jostled again by several officers bounding down the steps, who pointed at things while talking into radios, and then by others bounding up them who talked into radios while pointing at things. He was forced aside altogether when the foyer's pot plants were dragged down the steps, interrogated and then arrested for loitering.

It looked like a bizarre crime scene bereft of any crime.

"Move along. There's nothing to see here."

He turned to see another officer addressing his missing ears.

"Tell me," said Oscar, his indignation bordering on criminal, "do they teach discretion particularly early in your training?"

"I'm sorry?" the officer said, glancing at him in a more traditional manner.

Oscar very much doubted he was sorry at all and ignored him, which was appropriate considering the officer hadn't addressed him, so much as the air above his head.

"I said move along. There's nothing to see here."

When a police car backed into another, mounted its bonnet and set off its sirens, Oscar looked at him in a manner suggesting he might like to retract the statement.

"Nevertheless," the officer said, "no animal is to remain in the vicinity of the hotel this evening."

“I presume that’s to keep casualties to a minimum,” said Oscar, an observation suitably illustrated when a police van backed over a second one and crumpled it, forcing the driver to arrest himself.

The officer hurried away to cordon both.

An argument erupted further up the street where a police car had become wedged on the pavement after attempting to avoid becoming wedged on the pavement. Several officers tried lifting the vehicle. When unsuccessful, they decided to use a second car to drag the first free—which might have worked, had the officer driving remembered to disengage reverse. Because he hadn’t, the second was backed into the first and consequently shoved halfway up a telegraph pole. While blame was appointed, a third police car arrived and tried squeezing past the first two. When forced to mount the pavement, blame apportioning was suspended, as pavement-mounting had been responsible for the problem in the first place. Although it managed to scrape past, it lost a door and two hub-caps in the process, which resulted in a small round of applause and a frantic issuing of traffic infringement notices between all involved.

At the street’s other end, an officer had locked his keys in a car, which was apparent when a senior animal began shouting at him and gesticulating wildly. When the first began sobbing, the gesticulations became even more avid, accompanied with screams that if the car wasn’t moved immediately, neither of them would have to worry about keys or gesticulations, wild or otherwise, for much longer. In a bid for reprieve, the sobbing officer pulled out his baton and smashed the car’s window. Although this afforded acquisition of the keys, it set off the vehicle’s alarm. This left the senior animal even more furious and his gesticulations bordering on epileptic—especially when the first refused to get into the car because the glass would hurt his bottom.

While Oscar stared at the charade, a fire hydrant exploded and some furniture fell out of a window in the building across the street. How Ruen managed a non-existent crime rate with police like this was beyond him. It seemed Ruen ought to import a few criminals,

just to give the poor creatures something to work with.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/purging>

## CHAPTER 2

### From When Fear Is Not Afraid, Chapter 8

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*In which Oscar tries ordering a taxi from a hotel so dreadful that the only thing holding up its walls is a brazen determination not to draw attention to its squalor through inadvertent collapse.*

It was evening, and Oscar stood in front of a large cracked mirror in a room on the fourth floor of a hotel in Liebe. He'd been standing in front of it for some time, unable to decide what pair of pantaloons might best suit an occasion of abject humiliation. Whenever he tried a pair on and fluffed them, he envisioned himself amongst a crowd of prestigious poets, which had them deflate like a punctured tyre. Although he'd suffered humiliation at a poetry recital in the last book, this time things were different. The Mechanics of Verse lecture would not be the inane ramblings of a pathologically self-centred cat, but the most revered gathering of poets in the world. This, however, wasn't his only concern. His own attempts at imagist poetry sustained him through the ludicrous world of curiosa: poetry was an antidote to his struggles as a Velvet Paw of Asquith. But although he might act like a Velvet Paw, he didn't feel worthy of the title, and worried that when those attending proved he wasn't one of these either, he'd be left with nothing. With a sigh, he decided upon a pair and stuffed the remaining ones back into a little suitcase. After securing a scarf, he donned a hat, refusing to face swathes of poets with the added disadvantage of being earless.

He left the room and entered a hallway which deserved nothing of its first syllable and little of its second. The hotel was appalling.

Having decided discretion was essential, the Catacombs booked a room in one of Liebe's worst. This didn't bother Oscar, however, as Liebe's best hotels would be crammed with poets of credence in lieu of the lecture, and he was relieved not to be amongst them. The hallway's carpet was threadbare and devoid of colour except for a nondescript brown, which he doubted was part of its original hue and more an accumulation of the sort of thing vacuum cleaners had been invented for. Wallpaper, originally on the wall, had peeled and fallen over the years, having collected like autumn leaves along the skirting board. Some had caught upon ornate lamps, which jutted like withered claws from walls, but only one of them worked—up until he wandered past it, when its bulb fizzled and went pop. Not that it mattered, as there was ample light spilling in from street lamps outside; the cracks in the walls large enough to pass for windows. There was also evidence of rising damp so severe that it might be better described as reverse rain, and which, despite making the place smell like mud, nevertheless reduced the hotel's fire-risk markedly.

The lift wasn't working, so he took the stairs, which turned out to be just as broken and twice as dangerous. In the lobby, it was quiet, dark and dingy, and smelt like dead badger. It was, however, in a far better state of disrepair than upstairs as recent fire damage had gone some way to drying the place. Wallpaper, although in its more traditional location, was a collage of several patterns, including one that had been banned in more upmarket hotels for economic reasons. There was a wooden door on one side of the lobby so warped, that it appeared to be solely responsible for supporting the upper floors, and beside it hung faded pictures that, although doing nothing for the lobby's ambience, did a great deal to cover up its missing masonry. In one corner were some armchairs arranged around a little table that was missing a leg, which accounted for their arrangement, and another corner housed some stools against a window overlooking the street outside—at least, it would have done, had it not been covered with several sheets of brown paper and sticky-tape. There

was an aquarium also, though it had no water, and although it had some gravel, most of it was on the floor. There were some pot plants dotted around the place, one of which was in a pot, and a poor scattering of magazines that were dated shortly after the invention of the printing press.

Despite all this, Oscar felt it had the sort of rustic charm that was inevitable after having stayed in a hotel decorated with aerosoled manure. Moreover, there were no other patrons present, which pleased him greatly.

There was, however, a dog behind a reception desk who appeared even less interested in Oscar's presence than the newspaper he was reading.

He didn't look up.

He hadn't looked up when Oscar had checked in earlier that afternoon, either. He had, however, given him a key, which turned out to be for appearances only, as none of the rooms' doors had locks and only three of them had hinges.

Oscar approached the desk.

"I like what you've done with the place," he said.

The dog continued reading.

"That is, in as much as you've clearly done nothing with it. It's quite a novel approach and lends the place an old-world charm. A sort of teetering fragility. Though that might be the woodworm. I saw a rat earlier. Is it staying long?"

The dog's indifference was admirable.

Oscar placed his key on the counter. "You can have this back, if you like, as I clearly shan't be needing it."

The dog licked a claw and turned a page.

"Tell me," Oscar said, "which is the quickest way to the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe?"

"Depends on where you are," the dog said, without looking up.

"Well, I'm here. In Liebe."

"Then it should be fairly quick, relatively speaking."

"Yes, but from this hotel: which is the best way to get there?"

The dog shrugged. "There is no best way. As with most things, there are both advantages and disadvantages."

"As opposed to this place," said Oscar, his indignation growing, "which has only the latter." He wondered why every experience he'd had checking into hotels ended up being harder than physically getting to them. "So, would you be good enough to advise me of the quickest route out of the myriad available?"

"In a hurry, are you?" the dog asked, turning to the following page.

"I am, actually. I think I spent too long fluffing my pantaloons."

The dog glanced over the counter at them, before returning to his page. "Not long enough, if you ask me."

Oscar shifted uncomfortably. "Well, I'm not asking you—"

"Then what are you doing at my desk?" Another turn of page.

"Look, I need to get to the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe almost immediately—"

"You're a poet, are you?"

"Not really. But I do need to get there—"

"You won't need to be there unless you're a poet."

"Well, in a way then, yes, I am a poet."

"Only the greatest poets are invited to the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe," the dog said, frowning at one particular sentence. "And such creatures would certainly not downplay their status in the manner you just did." The dog looked at him. "Nor would they have sought accommodation in an establishment such as this."

"Establishment? You're actually comfortable using that word?"

"I'm certainly more comfortable than you are," he said, returning to the paper, "judging by those pantaloons."

Oscar fluffed them. "Why? What's wrong with them?"

"They're bigger than you are, for a start."

"It's the current fashion."

The dog humphed. "Where—in the dark?"

"No. Asquith, actually."

After an unimpressed humph, he took the key and threw it into

a shoebox containing several others, before returning to his paper.

“Right—look—can you at least order me a taxi?”

“I could, but the fact that you need one means you’re not worthy of attending the lecture.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“If you need a taxi then you’re clearly not a poet. Those worthy of attending the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe stay in much fancier hotels closer to the place.” He glanced at Oscar with the sort of contempt that usually books suites. “If you’re in this dump it says more about you than I need to.”

None of this was doing Oscar’s confidence any favours, and he considered going back to his room and staying there until the rot in the floorboards gave way and he returned to the lobby unconventionally. “Look,” he said, “I would like a taxi all the same. And if it’s too difficult then I can call one myself, if you have a telephone. Do you have a telephone? And by that I mean one that works and not used to prop up collapsed shelving.”

Another page was perused. “Your insistence on telephones and taxis proves that you know even less about poetry than I do. I see it all the time; animals believing themselves to be worthy of the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe just because they can rhyme a few words.”

“Just get me a fluffing taxi,” Oscar growled, “before I pull you across the desk and use you to flag one down.”

The dog’s indifference could have been nominated for an award. “I shall not direct you to the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe,” he said, “because you are not worthy. And as for your threats to use me as a flag—” He peered at Oscar’s pantaloons again, “are rather hypocritical, considering you’re wearing some.”

“Whether you believe me or not,” said Oscar, his teeth inseparable, “I nevertheless have an appointment at the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe. Just because I have booked a room in the sort of place that’s barely capable of housing internal walls does not reflect my credibility as a poet.”

“Of course it does. A gifted poet has pride enough to hire an

abode worthy of such talent, not languish a squalid cesspit like this.”

Oscar placed his paws upon the counter and leant upon both, saying, “I’ll have you know that one of the greatest hotels I have ever stayed in was also one of the most disgusting.”

“I rest my case.”

“Your rationale is appalling,” Oscar growled. “I cannot believe you consider poetry to be related to pride.”

“My case is now comatose.”

“Poetry is about what one sees and feels. It’s inherently introspective and has nothing to do with image!”

“My case is now clinically dead and funeral arrangements are pending—”

“Pride is the antithesis of poetry!”

“It’s now cremated, buried and residing within a box labelled return to sender.”

Oscar stared at him. “You just don’t get it, do you? And I suppose you believe the epitome of a poet is a creature such as the D’dôdôSette?”

“Oh, quite the epitome, indeed,” the dog said. “The animal is both artist and performer. A bard, no less. His whopping pride complements his massive talent.”

Leaning across the counter, Oscar hissed, “I not only know the D’dôdôSette well, but can assure you that although he was once as arrogant as you believe, he has come to realise conceit to be the greatest hindrance to the art!”

The dog offered a lethargic chuckle and put his newspaper down. “Your claim to know the D’dôdô-Sette is even more fantastic than your claim to be a poet.”

Oscar was about to say something further, before suspecting the dog’s impudence was a hobby. His own confidence was already cowering under the table mentioned previously and was contemplating a career change by becoming one of its legs. “I don’t need your help anyway,” he said, leaving the desk.

“Finding your way might be difficult,” the dog said, returning to

his newspaper, “considering how lost you are to begin with.”

Oscar stormed from the hotel and tried slamming its door. But because it didn't close very well to begin with, it rattled and fell off, which cheered him enormously, though he peered up at the building in case the rest of the place followed.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/fear>

## CHAPTER 3

### From The Alchemists Of Vra, Chapter 6

---

*In which Oscar arrives at a hotel so spectacular that he narrowly avoids leaving evidence of his awe as a puddle in its foyer, before struggling to confirm his reservation at a desk only marginally less impressive.*

Inside hotel d'Plempt, such concerns left him and he gawked at the sort of opulence that leaves interior designers snapping their pencils and wondering what to do for the rest of their lives.

The foyer was stunning.

Not just in a visual sense. Or even an architectural one. It was also stunning in a very literal sense, too. It was stunning in an agricultural, political and culinary sense also, but these weren't apparent from the foyer.

It was large and gilded in pink marble. From its ceiling an enormous chandelier hung, with several others in orbit. Their lit glass painted a soft white across a vast ceiling space, and made the pink marble shine in translucent rose. At the foyer's far end, two graceful arcs of staircase wound up to floors above, which overlooked the foyer to render it an atrium. Upon walls either side, huge throws of burgundy velvet cascaded from the ceiling like waterfalls, and hanging plants dripped beside them in a frame of deep, shiny green. Besides being stunning, the hotel was also busy. Animals scissored across its foyer like a poorly coordinated finale of musical spectacular. Some waited at an enormous curve of desk that wound half-way along a wall, while the opposite housed lifts which pinged softly when pausing to spill animals across the floor. Upon staircases and

balconies, animals meandered, apparently used to such splendour in that they weren't passing out and falling from them.

Oscar, however, wasn't used to anything of the sort. As a Velvet Paw of Asquith, he was trained to blend into any environment—which in Plempt wasn't difficult considering it was blanketed in snow. But in a foyer as opulent as this, he had no idea how to, especially when he'd just thrown himself across its driveway.

“Can I help you at all?”

He turned to a cat in a smart uniform with the sort of smile that had probably booked a suite.

“Well, yes, rather,” Oscar said. “I believe I have a room booked in the name of Dooven.”

With a nod, she gestured that he follow her to the massive curve of desk. When she wandered some length behind it, Oscar followed on its other side until she stopped and rummaged through things upon it.

“Is that Dooven spelt with a G?” she asked.

Oscar blinked. “A what?”

“A G.”

“Er, no,” said Oscar. “I shouldn't think so. Dooven is spelt with a D, as in dangerous.”

The cat looked down at the desk again. “Dooven,” she repeated.

He nodded helpfully.

“And definitely not with a G?”

“How could Dooven be spelt with a G?” he asked.

“I don't know, that's why I'm asking.”

“It is not spelt with a G, I can assure you.”

The cat looked down at the desk again and did some more thinking, before saying, “Look, can I just ask again—for the sake of clarity—that the name Dooven is *not* spelt with a G?”

Oscar sighed. “Look. My name is *Dooven*. Oscar Teabag-*Dooven*.” He spelt it out for her.

“So there's really no G in there at all,” the cat said.

“Not unless your spelling is atrocious.”

“Is your spelling atrocious?”

“What?”

“Is your spelling atrocious?” she said. “If it is, then it explains why it might be spelt with a G.”

“No. My spelling is excellent. Especially considering it’s my name.”

She frowned at more things behind the desk. “Are you certain it’s your name?”

He stared at her. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m just trying to ascertain what reasons might lie behind Dooven not being spelt with a G.”

Oscar put his little suitcase down and placed both paws carefully upon the desk. “There’s only one reason Dooven is not spelt with a G,” he said, “and that’s because it isn’t.”

“How old were you when you learnt to spell your name?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Well, can you perhaps try? Otherwise this could go on all night.”

“I think it already has.”

Some animals arrived at the desk nearby and checked in with no trouble whatsoever.

“Listen,” said Oscar, leaning closer. “It really isn’t complicated. I’m sure my office has booked a room in the name of Dooven. After all, they managed to arrange a taxi to pick me up from the station.”

“Ah, but a taxi doesn’t have a desk.”

“No, but it does have wheels.”

“Are they spelt with a G?”

Oscar pulled at his ears and missed. Which gave him an idea.

“G?” he asked, in feigned realisation. “Yes—of course; G. Sorry, I thought you said M.”

“So Dooven is spelt with a G?”

He nodded and tutted at his own ineptitude, before pointing at the top of his head, “I don’t hear very well, you see.”

“So, Dooven with a G then?”

“What?” he said, to prove the fact.

“Dooven spelt with G?”

“Yes.”

The cat looked down at the desk again. “I’m sorry. We don’t have any reservation of Dooven spelt with a G.”

“I’m sorry—what?”

She looked up at him. “We have no reservation under the name Dooven spelt with a G.”

“Then why have you been banging on about it?”

“Because this is the G counter. If your reservation is made under a name beginning with G, then it would be here.”

“The G counter?” Oscar asked, bewildered.

“Yes.”

“You have a counter specifically for reservations that begin with G?”

“Of course. Hotel d’Plempt is a very busy hotel, especially during the Assembly.”

Oscar took a deep, shuddering breath and said, “Then why didn’t you mention this when we met?”

“I did,” she said. “I specifically asked you whether Dooven is spelt with a G.”

“But Dooven *sounds* like a D! Did you not think so? Did you not think to yourself, ‘Dooven—hmm, sounds a bit like a D’?”

The cat looked at him as though used to animals being unreasonable. “It could have been a silent G.”

Oscar raised his paw to stop the conversation before something serious happened to one of them. “Look,” he said. “Perhaps we can start this again, but over at the D counter.”

“Certainly. Good idea.”

When Oscar tried for that direction, the animal remained where she was.

“Are you not coming?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “I work on the G counter.”

He stared again, before enquiring, “Tell me, this place isn’t

managed by a certain Percival S. Minton by any chance?”

She shook her head, saying that she'd never heard of the animal.

Having found his room, which was not under D after all, but under T for Teabag-Dooven—which was academic in the end as they didn't have a pen either—Oscar changed into his extra-fluffy, black pantaloons with matching scarf. He wandered, along with what appeared to be the majority of Plemp't's population, into the hotel's main auditorium for the D'dôdô-Sette's recital. It was nearing nine and he wondered what proportion of the audience cramming themselves into the place was part of the Affable Nations' Assembly, and how many were attending just to hear the silly cat's rantings.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/alchemists>

## CHAPTER 4

### From The Purging Of Ruen, Chapter 26

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*In which Oscar returns to Hotel d'Ruen to find it's in a much worse state than he left it, and that the dining room is still out of bounds because of said state.*

When he trotted up the hotel steps, more guests absconded, their sobs bordering on hyperventilation. The stench that followed hit him like something very large, very fast and made entirely of steel. He staggered backwards, with the Dervy catching him before he sprawled across the ground a second time.

Bracing against her, he swallowed some phlegm that decided it would prefer staying in the car.

"I don't think this is going to be as easy as I'd imagined," he said.

"It never *ith*."

Wiping his mouth, he fought back up the steps and pushed at doors. With a snarl of anticipation, he entered. The Dervy, morbidly fascinated, followed.

Inside, they stopped, stared and gagged.

The foyer smelt like greasy cheese mixed with sweetened sick, and they cringed when chunks of plaster fell from its ceiling as frantic patrons gathered luggage upstairs. Wallpaper peeled and congealed in thick, soggy lumps, looking like a sneeze from something even larger than the steel thing mentioned previously. Pot plants were nothing more than singed sticks in withered soil, and furnishings looked as though they'd been gone over with a blow torch and an assortment of blunted cutlery. Remnants of tattered cordon hung

from the ceiling like streamers designed to celebrate despair, while other bits were glued across walls like besieged toilet paper.

Picking their way across a floor that could only be described as flammable, they edged toward the dining room. With his scarf positioned as it had been the previous evening, Oscar made his way with a disgusted curiosity, while the Dervy followed in chokes of sheer disbelief. Peering through its doorway, he saw it had fared even worse than the foyer, which left him realising how badly the sign had been misspelt after all. With muffled obscenities, he pushed what was left of the door. It fell from what remained of hinge and splattered to the floor, before sinking.

Oscar tried saying something, but gagged instead.

Lost for words, the Dervy did the same.

Upon its walls, singed wallpaper peeled in curls around crusty lumps of aerosoled manure. The dining table sagged alarmingly, and would have broken altogether had it not been cast in plaster, albeit brown and lumpy. Chairs lay scattered across the room, thrown when diners fled a sick-soaked floor. Paw marks were streaked though oily, sludge splattered tables, and a mound of pooh steamed nearby, presumably deposited while slippery paws grappled with door handles.

The guilt was all too much for the Dervy and she turned to retch, hoiking up a few mouthfuls of sick, which she dribbled onto similar excretions already congealing upon the floor.

“Can I help you?” a voice asked pleasantly.

Both cats turned, with the Dervy pretending she’d been putting something in, rather than letting something out, of her mouth.

Percival S. Minton smiled in a manner unbecoming the state of venue. “Would you like a room?” he asked, wringing his paws as though trying to unscrew the things.

“I *beg* your pardon?” said Oscar, noticing the dog’s paws were covered in excrement, the wringing rendering it into a lather of sorts.

“A room. Would you like one?”

Oscar and the Dervy glanced at each other. But before Oscar could utter some appropriate profanities, the lift on the foyer's far side pinged. From it tumbled several sobbing animals clutching half-packed suitcases. Lunging for the exit, one screamed at another whose suitcase suddenly fell apart to leave it, before grabbing his paw and dragging him from the premises amidst chokes, wails and an inadvertent defecation.

"It's just that we have some vacancies at the moment," Percival said, turning back to them.

The Dervy, overwhelmed with guilt, turned from him with a groan.

"Are you in charge here?" Oscar asked, his astonishment deciding it should probably rent a room.

Percival nodded, having been given a promotion he was not in the least expecting. "I am a Hospitality Patron Logistical Support Assistant."

They stared at him.

"I collect bags," he said. "At least, I did up until this morning. But because I am currently the only member of staff present, I'm doing everything else as well."

"The only member of staff?"

"Yes. All the others are either crying, mute or in hospital, you see. Which is not a big problem, considering I've only had to manage patrons checking out, and that doesn't involve much more than dealing with flying keys."

In a convenient illustration, one of the escapees returned to hurl a key across the foyer, which landed beside Percival in some drying lumps of sick. Picking it up, he waved a pleasant thank you to the already absconded patron, before wiping it on his paw and wading toward the reception desk.

"You can't seriously think animals will want rooms here after all *this*?" Oscar said, following.

Placing the key upon a full rack of others, Percival turned to them with another unbecoming smile. "Why not?"

Struggling for words, Oscar gave up on any and gestured at the congealing filth around them.

Raising a paw to imply he'd already considered it, he said, "It's ambience."

"Amb—this isn't *ambience!*" Oscar cried. "This is *disgusting!* You can't offer rooms while the hotel's in this state! This is the single most revolting state of affairs I have ever had the misfortune of witnessing!" He turned to the Dervy. "No offence."

But she shrugged, agreeing with him.

Percival leant upon his desk, his chin upon clasped paws, which gave him a small beard of pooh. "When one has been in the hotel game for as long as I have," he said, "one learns to take advantage of changing circumstance. You see, I don't believe in misfortune, only *missed* fortune."

"Missed fortune," Oscar repeated flatly.

Percival nodded. "In this business, nothing is more invigorating than change. Getting the pot stirred, if you will. Such change needs to be embraced. One needs to work with it and evolve the management model. One needs to seize opportunity and move forward in order to stay ahead of competition." He winked at them. "Moving forward is the best way to get closure."

Oscar placed his face in paws and groaned. When he removed it, he said, "Does your business model take into account, Percival, that no other hotel in Ruen currently has its interior draped in thick curtains of erupted *faeces?*"

Percival winked again. "*Ambience.*" Reaching for an appointment book, he said, "Apparently it's all about seeing things differently, which is the best way of getting closure."

"Please don't say that."

He looked up. "Say what?"

"That stupid expression: getting closure."

"Why not?"

"Because it makes you sound like a door."

Percival offered him the appointment book and a pen to sign in

with.

“What’s this?” Oscar asked, not believing he was being offered a room after all.

“I thought you wanted a room.”

“No, Percival. I do not want a room.”

“Oh.” Crestfallen, he retracted both and closed the appointment book. Wiping pen upon sleeve, he slumped behind his desk, his eyes misty and bottom lip wobbling in a sort of generic surrender.

Oscar glanced at the Dervy, who indicated that she was not getting involved, having done more than enough already. He looked at the little dog, who was either dreadfully naive, or so inexperienced he’d resorted to some appalling textbook on hotel management as a means to cope.

“Look,” said Oscar, feeling sorry for him, “I don’t need a room here because I already have one.”

“You do?”

Oscar nodded.

Percival’s hope withered back into surrender and he held out his paw for yet another return of key.

“But I don’t want to return my key,” Oscar said, “because my room is nice, it has a nice view and even the window frame is nice. In fact, I would like to keep my room and go to it now.”

Percival stared, hope blossoming across his face like a meadow of well-fertilized spring blooms. “You wish to *stay*?” he whispered.

Oscar nodded again.

The little dog, thrilled beyond remark, agreed wholeheartedly about the window frame in particular. With a flurry through appointment book, he declared that not only would Oscar be Hotel d’Ruen’s Guest of Honour, but would also be the hotel’s only guest.

“Would you like room service?” Percival asked, following them across the sticky floor toward lifts.

“Er, no.”

“Are you quite certain? I can easily get the kitchen fired up, wipe down a few saucepans and wash a couple of mugs?”

“I’d be extremely cautious about firing anything up in that kitchen, if I were you,” Oscar said, pressing at the lift call button, before realising it was also coated in pooh. “Unless you’re planning to demolish the place and start again from scratch.”

When the lift opened, it revealed more sobbing patrons clutching hastily packed luggage. Embarrassed, their sobbing faltered, and they found the sort of intrigue with their suitcases that they ought to have found when packing the things. Amidst mumbles, they sidled from the lift and hurried across the foyer—but not before hurling a key at Percival.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/purging>

## CHAPTER 5

### From The Alchemists Of Vra, Chapter 25

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*In which Oscar and Vaasi-Vee are chaperoned to a chateau high in the Alps of the Mahlese mountains, which leaves them feeling more uncomfortable than if the Alp's pointy bits were physically inserted into them.*

They passed beneath a stone archway and entered an exquisitely manicured winter courtyard where a gardener was mowing some snow. There were ice sculptures, too, shaped like trees, and a fountain with its water frozen. The chateau looked rather like a castle, but without the pointy bits and with more snow. Oscar and Vaasi-Vee glanced at each other; it looked like the sort of place one had to book several lifetimes in advance, and take out a mortgage for the deposit.

Several animals weighed down with masses of jewellery skied from its entrance. They laughed expensively until falling over, after which they attached stabilising skis to their elbows to help balance their swathes of riches. The D'dôdôSette strode up the chateau's steps, where a well-rugged attendant bowed so deeply that he also fell over. Oscar wondered about helping him up, before realising he probably couldn't afford to. The D'dôdôSette marched into the chateau's innards, which turned out to be as spectacular as its outards—though with less snow and mountains and sky. Chandeliers hung like frozen rain in hallways smelling of smoke-stained oak. The carpet upon which they trod was red, at least a paw thick and probably still the original. Upon pedestals stood suits of armour, with halberds held to attention should their need arise—which seemed unlikely:

should enemies ever attempt the climb, they'd be exhausted and probably ask to be helped back down again.

Passing elegant rooms, Oscar and Vaasi-Vee glimpsed animals relaxing and reading and smoking and dining. Some were deep in conversation, others not so inclined and a few caught in indignant combinations of both. Regardless, they were all comfortable in such palatial surrounds, unlike Oscar and Vaasi-Vee, who glanced at each other worriedly.

At a door, the D'dôdô-Sette stopped and knocked. It was opened to reveal a room not unlike those they'd passed. Amidst the murmur of conversation and chinking of glasses, soft music played through air smelling of vanilla and baking. The D'dôdô-Sette stepped aside for Vaasi-Vee to enter. Hesitantly, she did so. But before Oscar could do the same, he pushed in front. Posh animals looked up, before smiling at the famous bard and his beautiful guest. Their expressions fell, however, when Oscar's grubbiness followed.

With a sort of expensive efficiency, a waiter bowed and fell over, before ushering the D'dôdô-Sette and Vaasi-Vee to a table. After the D'dôdô-Sette had given instructions, the waiter bowed, fell over a second time, and scabbled away. Oscar stood beside them awkwardly, waiting for another dainty sneeze. Several nearby patrons glared at him as though he were coated in sick, and one gagged as though about to be.

"Why do they keep falling over?" Vaasi-Vee asked, watching the waiter limp between tables.

"It's a traditional thing," the D'dôdô-Sette said. "It implies a gratitude to serve animals like me so overwhelming, that they lose consciousness."

"They *faint*?"

"Yes. It demonstrates our worthiness through a distinct lack of their own."

"But that's dreadful!"

"Well, Plempet did try and remove such customs during their tourism campaign, but it didn't have much effect."

“Why not?”

“Because their gratitude in serving animals like me is so overwhelming that they lose consciousness.” He looked at Oscar. “You can sit in there,” he said, waving a paw dismissively towards the kitchen. “I’m sure they have a shelf you can stand under. In an establishment such as this, of course, none of them will be wonky, which you might see as a promotion of sorts.”

Oscar glared at glaring patrons, the D’dôdôSette and Vaasi-Vee in that order, lingering on the latter.

“Oscar must sit with us,” Vaasi-Vee said. “In case I get hungry.”

“That, my dear, is what waiters are for.”

“And if I need sticky-tape?”

“Again, waiters.”

She leant forward. “The D’dôdôSette, this might sound silly, but I find these animals and this place rather intimidating—”

He chuckled. “Miss Vaasi-Vee, I can assure you that your beauty alone renders you far above them.”

“That’s nice, but I’m not certain I could think of pertinent questions about your greatness without Oscar here to make me feel more comfortable.”

The D’dôdôSette glanced at Oscar. “His presence makes you feel *more* comfortable?”

When she nodded, he sighed.

“Very well,” he said. “Sit here, cat. But don’t make any sudden moves. Animals of this establishment are used to the finest things in life, so they will not take kindly to the presence of the worst.”

“Now look here,” said Oscar.

Again, Vaasi-Vee again interrupted. “So, the D’dôdôSette, do you come here often?”

“Well, it’s a quaint place, certainly,” he said, as much to irritate Oscar as impress her. “It’s dreadfully exclusive and unbelievably expensive—but then again, so am I.”

Oscar started to say something again, but the D’dôdôSette spoke over him.

“These animals are all fabulously rich, Miss Vaasi-Vee, and don’t have much to do with the dreariness of the ordinary world—except to make large amounts of money from it, don’t you know.”

“But you know them?” asked Vaasi-Vee, determined not to let Oscar intervene. “You lower yourself regularly to the world of mere mortals?”

“Yes. But only because I’m so generous and great that I insist on sharing my talents with those who have none.”

Oscar folded his paws and glowered. A grave-looking animal at the next table held a napkin to her nose and glowered also.

“I’ve been in a fight, all right?” he growled at her.

She put a paw to her chest as though having never heard anything so outrageous. He was about to ask whether she wanted to be in one, when the D’dôdô-Sette interrupted.

He flashed a pacifying smile at the animal.

“Do not,” he then growled at Oscar, “even begin to speak to these animals, Dooven. For you are so out of your depth here that you have already drowned.”

“Oh, shut up,” said Oscar, having had more than enough of the cat’s artificially permed mane and his great armour plating of fur. He felt worthless in comparison, which afforded an audacity he was keen to spend. If the D’dôdô-Sette had brought them here to impress Vaasi-Vee while making him feel inadequate, then he could not only suffer the consequences, but take them home in a presentation box. “I’ve had just about enough of you,” he said. “I think you’re confusing yourself with a deity, which is ridiculous considering they generally have more personality and less perm. And considering you were about to belt that dog outside, I find your hypocrisy appalling. Just think yourself lucky I didn’t make the rest of you all smeary too.”

The D’dôdô-Sette’s eyes narrowed. “You didn’t prevent me from doing anything, cat. I was the one who saved you, remember? If I hadn’t stepped in when I did, you’d now have more holes in you than certain expensive imported cheeses.”

Oscar humphed. “I was doing perfectly well until you stuck

your big stupid paw in.”

There was a laugh. “You were gnawing your own tail! Had I not removed that ticket inspector when I did, you would now be as tail-less as you are earless!”

“That’s as hypocritical as anything I’ve heard, considering your tendencies to rile entire nations. Have you forgotten that politically-attired dog at your stupid recital party?” He leant closer. “I’ve now prevented you from getting into *two* fights, and if it happens a third time, I shall have to speak to your mother.”

“Well, I recall that ticket inspector being rather insightful when it came to *yours!*”

“If you don’t revise your attitude, Dodo-thingy, I’ll take you down so many pegs you’ll be on the floor!”

“Ha! You couldn’t even reach my level to try, you stupid animal!”

Oscar stood, saying, “Then I shall harass you to such a degree, cat, that you’ll be thrown out of this place forever!”

But the D’dôdô-Sette stood also, saying, “That doesn’t matter, you silly animal, considering I own three chateaus already!”

Vaasi-Vee stood also. “That’s enough!” she cried. “Stop this! No more! This is not how respectable animals act!”

Her words cut through tension like something surgical, leaving all three realising the room had fallen silent and its contents staring at them. There was a small cough of disapproval from somewhere, followed by a discreet clearing of throat.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/alchemy>

## CHAPTER 6

From When Fear Is Not Afraid, Chapter 18

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*In which Oscar tries to have breakfast in the sort of hotel that has difficulty spelling the word, before noticing some framed sick on a wall.*

With a sigh, Oscar struggled out of bed, amazed he'd been able to sleep at all, considering the thing was so lumpy that it didn't need a pillow—which was fortunate, as its pillow was even lumpier. After donning a fresh pair of pantaloons and fluffing them into the sort of thing often seen hanging in warm summer skies, he headed downstairs for breakfast, with the word used so loosely, that it had already fallen, tumbled to the bottom of them and was waiting for him by the reception desk covered in bruises. The hotel was not the sort of place he'd order a hot-fin, let alone a meal of food. If it did make hot-fin it would presumably contain lumps so large that it would be better suited to sealing up some of the more draughty gaps in its walls. When he arrived in the lobby, he suspected the closest he might get to breakfast would be the carpet, as it appeared to have had several such meals brought up on it over the years, with the apparent conviction that leaving them there helped its adherence to the floor. While two patrons argued with the dog behind the counter, Oscar feigned indifference by admiring a small print upon the wall nearby. It was only after the patron snatched the newspaper from the blasé paws of the insufferable animal that Oscar realised it was not a print at all, but congealed sick. Because the argument became heated and involved threats of unconventional stapler use, he admired it nonetheless.

The two patrons stormed from the counter and strode toward the rickety stairs, before thumping up them until their paws broke through its wood-wormed planks. While they swore and struggled to free themselves, the insufferable dog rounded the counter to retrieve his newspaper from where it had been thrown. With admirable indifference, he scanned it while returning to the desk and advising the necessary repairs would be billed to their room. Ignoring their yelps and cries for rope, Oscar stepped to the reception desk, determined not to be riled a second time. “Good morning,” he said, regretting the niceties. “I was wondering if you do breakfast here?”

As he had the previous evening, the dog ignored Oscar and scanned the paper as proof its contents were far more interesting. When Oscar asked again, the dog did reply, though with an answer so ambiguous it would have benefitted from its own question mark.

“Sometimes,” the dog said, without looking up.

When nothing more was forthcoming, Oscar tried prompting him without using a clenched paw. “Can you be a little more specific?”

It was evident he could not.

Oscar took hold of the desk again. “Perhaps you didn’t understand the question: I was wondering whether you do breakfast here.”

There was a slow turning of page. “Sometimes.”

Oscar had been through a lot over the past few days, and wouldn’t be surprised to learn he was about to go through a great deal more. Consequently, he was not in the mood for insufferable, self-righteous animals whose smugness had evolved solely to prevent them acknowledging their own inadequacies.

He took a deep breath and asked a third time, “Might sometime be *now*, perhaps?”

“No,” said the dog. “I had breakfast earlier.”

Oscar blinked several times. “I meant breakfast for *patrons*. Not *you*.”

“Then why didn’t you say so?”

“Because I didn’t think you were so pedantic.”

The dog looked up from his paper. "And I didn't think you were so stupid."

Oscar gritted several teeth and swallowed the sort of growl best described as antisocial. "Tell me," he said, un-gritting one of them. "Do you believe that you appear clever when insulting others?"

"No," said the dog, returning to his newspaper. "I appear clever because I am."

"Appearances mean little."

The dog peered over the desk at Oscar's pantaloons in pointed agreement.

"Do you like riling your customers?" Oscar asked.

"It does make the day go faster," the dog admitted, returning to his paper.

"So does intensive care."

This was met with a distinct yawn.

Fuming, Oscar said, "Well, I wouldn't touch any breakfast you might conjure up in this cesspit anyway."

"Then why did you ask?"

"To annoy you."

The dog humphed from behind the newspaper. "I'm not the one getting all hot under the collar."

"Tell me, is that the same paper you were reading two days ago?"

"No."

"Well, the date suggests otherwise."

A corner of paper dropped and an eye peered from behind it. "What?"

"The date," Oscar said, pointing at it. "There. Your newspaper is three weeks old."

The eye zigzagged in rapid thought. "I like to take my time."

"Really? Are you certain you can read?"

The dog returned to doing so, saying, "Tell me: how were the Inaugurate Halls of Liebe?"

"Fine, thank you."

“Now you’re the one pretending,” the dog growled. “Certainly you weren’t admitted to the place.”

“I can assure you that I was.”

The paper was put down and folded. “We have been through this before,” the dog said. “There is no use pretending you are a poet when all evidence insists otherwise.”

“Interesting. I would say exactly the same about your denial of being a complete fluffing git.”

The dog sneered a smile and said, “I do not know which is more pitiful: believing yourself to be something you’re not, or having to lie about it to others.”

“Oh, don’t be so hard on yourself. It’s not your fault you have to run this dump.”

“I was referring to you.”

“Are you certain? I’d reflect on those words if I were you, as they seemed most applicable.”

They were interrupted by the return of the patrons, who’d escape the shattered stairs and represented themselves at the counter. One was a large dog who banged a paw upon it so hard that he got a splinter, while the other removed shattered pieces of stair from both of them.

“We are not staying!” the large dog thundered, before turning to Oscar. “And I wouldn’t stay if I were you! This place is appalling! We were going to retrieve our luggage, but decided against it on account of the place being so rickety that our suitcases will presumably plummet through the ceiling by themselves in a moment!” He turned to the dog behind the desk. “And if you add anything to our bill other than a written apology, I shall turn your bottom into a stapler and staple it to your face!” He leant closer, adding, “And I shall use especially *large* staples!”

The dog behind the desk remained unimpressed and began unfolded his newspaper to continue reading.

Oscar glanced up at the furious animal. “Yes, but have you tried their breakfast?” he asked.

The large dog blinked down at him. “Tried their what?”

“Their breakfast. I’m trying to see if they do breakfast here. So far I’ve got nothing resembling an answer, which is frustrating because I am hungry and in dire need of a hot-fin.”

The dog took a breath in order to placate a similarly disenchanted patron. “If they do breakfast here,” he said, glaring at the dog behind the desk, “I wouldn’t go anywhere near it—that’s if they could stop it escaping the plate. Indeed, I suspect it would be more likely to eat you, in fact. Moreover, I suspect their hot-fin would be about as lumpy as this arrogant animal’s face is about to become in a minute.”

The smaller dog beside him said, “I suspect they did do breakfast here once.” He pointed at the congealed sick upon the wall. “I think that’s some of it there.”

Oscar glanced at the splatter he’d admired earlier and sighed. He needed a decent breakfast with a well made hot-fin before vault-hunting.

“There is, however, a place I know that does brilliant breakfasts with superb hot-fin,” the large dog said. “Unsurprisingly, it’s nowhere near this dump.”

“Oh?”

“Here,” said the large dog. “I’ll gladly write it down for you.”

Leaning across the desk, he snatched the newspaper, which was accompanied with a satisfying tear. Snatching a pen from the desk, he scrawled in unnecessarily large letters, the address across one entire sheet. Putting the pen down, he folded it and offered it to Oscar with the sort of satisfaction that getting up in the morning rarely affords.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/fear>

## CHAPTER 7

From The Alchemists Of Vra, Chapter 22

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*In which Oscar realises that the only thing more difficult than checking into a hotel room is checking into someone else's.*

There was a tug at his scarf.

“He’s not here,” Vaasi-Vee said, having returned.

“What?”

“The D’dôdô-Sette is no longer here at the hotel.”

After staring at her, he stared at the desk. She’d been there only a minute. “What about our reservations?” he asked.

“Done. But the D’dôdô-Sette is not here. We missed him by no more than an hour, apparently.”

He looked at her. “Are you quite serious?”

She nodded worriedly.

“No, I mean in having already sorted out reservation?” he asked, staring at the desk again. It had taken him almost a week.

She gave him a key as proof. “Yes, Oscar. All done. But the D’dôdô-Sette is not here.”

Having stared at the desk, he then stared at the myriad of animals at it, none of which were hitting anything. “You mean you have organised our reservations that quickly? Without needing to change your name, or the alphabet or re-registering your place of *birth* or anything?”

Now it was her turn for confusion.

“What are you going on about?” But then she didn’t care. “The D’dôdô-Sette, Oscar, is no longer a guest at this hotel.”

“That’s unbelievable.”

“I know! I specifically recall him saying he intended to stay here for some time, skiing and relaxing and showing off.”

“No, I mean it’s unbelievable you managed to confirm our reservations so quickly—with that same idiot animal at the desk. How in fluff did you manage it? Vaasi-Vee isn’t spelt with a G, is it?” He pushed past her, convinced his attempt had been for their amusement and at his expense.

But Vaasi-Vee had enough. “*Oscar!*”

He turned. She looked beautiful and worried—a combination in companion he’d become familiar with after his previous books. He sighed. “I’m sorry. I was just rather flustered last time I was here.”

“What are we going to do?”

Their plan hinged on her conviction that the D’dôdô-Sette remained in Plempt. If the cat wasn’t here, then he could be anywhere.

Literally.

“We’d better be certain,” Oscar decided. “What room was he in?”

She frowned for a moment. “Four hundred and thirteen?”

He nodded. “Right. Wait here.”

After striding across the foyer, he waited at a randomly chosen letter of the alphabet, as it clearly made no difference to anything.

A receptionist turned to him and smiled.

“I need to get into room four hundred and thirteen,” Oscar said, having no idea how he might rationalise such claims if asked.

Which he was.

“I see, sir. And why exactly is that?”

“Because I need to.”

“I see.”

There was a disinterested look at something behind the desk that could have been a goldfish for all Oscar knew.

“I have no booking registered in suite four hundred and thirteen, sir.”

“I know, it was vacated recently by the bard, that—the—that

Dodo-Setting animal. He's left a manuscript behind, apparently. I've been asked to retrieve it before he sues your bottom for losses incurred."

The animal stared. "I *beg* your pardon?"

"I am one of his many lawyers," Oscar said, warming to the role, as he was sure all lawyers were cross, and was for the moment pretty indignant himself. "And if I am not given the key to four hundred and thirteen pretty smartly, the only things you'll be renting your rooms out to are subpoenas."

The receptionist swallowed. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to wait here for a moment?" He backed away accordingly.

"It would be a lot quicker if you just gave me the key."

"Nevertheless, perhaps you would wait?"

When he hurried from the desk, Oscar turned to Vaasi-Vee and nodded that it was all in paw.

A moment later, the receptionist returned with a very posh-looking dog wearing glasses so low on his snout that he was presumably short-smelled.

"May I help you, sir?" the dog said. "I am the manager."

Oscar held out his paw in a I-haven't-got-time-to-go-through-it-all-again sort of way and said, "Key to the recently vacated room of the—that—Dodo-setting animal, please. And quickly, before I make a telephone call that ends up with you wiping your bottom on affidavits."

"May I ask what all this is about?" the manager asked, unconvinced.

"There's a manuscript he left behind in his room that if not recovered in the next five minutes is going to give birth to more sworn statements than you have expletives in your vocabulary."

"It is a *suite*, sir."

"What?"

"Four hundred and thirteen is a *suite*, sir, not a room."

"There's a difference?"

"Several times the price, in fact. And includes heated towel

racks, self-fluffing pillows and a complimentary pen.”

Oscar blinked. “Well, nevertheless, I intend to retrieve the manuscript in the next five minutes or they’ll be bashing your front door down with enormous swathes of legally binding *things*.”

They stared.

“It’s not complicated!” he growled. “Just give me the key to four hundred and thirteen!”

“No.”

“What?”

“No. You cannot have the key. This is my hotel and I don’t like your tone. And now, you can go away.”

Oscar stared and then swallowed, the latter not doing the former any favours.

There was a standoff and all three looked at each other until Oscar realised that were he to remain much longer, he’d just look silly.

After a moment he asked, “Might I perhaps book the room instead?”

“What?”

“Might I book the room? Could I perhaps book room four hundred and thirteen? You mentioned a moment ago it was free.”

“You mean the suite.”

Oscar nodded.

The manager glanced at the receptionist. “Well, I don’t know. I’m still rather annoyed with your tone—”

“Please,” said Oscar. “I’ll pay for it and everything.” He pointed at Vaasi-Vee and his suitcase beside her. “I’ve got a suitcase too, see? A nice one. It’s quite new and very shiny. Frankly, I’d feel uncomfortable leaving it in anything other than a suite.”

The manager glared over his glasses in a manner that would make disapproval uncomfortable with itself. “Very well,” he said. “If you really want it, then yes, I suppose you may. Although it hasn’t been cleaned yet.”

“That’s fine. I don’t want it cleaned.”

“Nevertheless, it will be. Those are the rules. Cleaning will take about twenty minutes. So do not approach the suite until such time has passed.” He leant forward. “And I can assure you, *sir*, that if any such document is found, my staff would advise me immediately.”

He left to permit the menial logistics of reservation, and the receptionist fiddled behind the desk and asked Oscar’s name.

Oscar offered an assortment to cover all bases.

“And how long do you wish to stay, *sir*?” the animal asked.

“About half an hour should do it.”

“I’m sorry, *sir*, but suites have a minimum booking period of a week.”

“A *week*? But I only want to check the waste-paper basket!”

“Nevertheless, that is the rule.”

“Won’t that be terribly expensive?”

“Quite astonishingly so.”

Oscar muttered some things best not recounted.

“A week then,” the receptionist wrote, before asking for an astonishing amount of money.

A moment later, Oscar trotted back to Vaasi-Vee and showed her the key to four hundred and thirteen.

“How did you manage that?” she asked, picking up their suitcases.

“I pretended to be a legal representative of the Dodo-setting and insisted a poem he’s working on was left behind, before advising if they didn’t hand over the key, I’d get really cross.”

“And the manager?” she asked as they waited for the lift.

“Oh,” said Oscar, having forgotten she’d watched the whole thing. “He came to apologise.”

“Apologise?”

The lift pinged and they got in.

“Yes, for the receptionist’s hesitation in giving me the key immediately. I dismissed his attempts, of course. I suspect my performance was just really convincing. I didn’t mean to be intimidating.”

She smirked.

They rose, and after another ping they alighted.

“Is that why you then paid them a quite astonishing amount of money?” she asked.

“What? Oh. That was to keep them quiet about the whole thing.”

“As was your crying while paying?”

“Which floor are we on?” he said, ignoring her and scowling at the numbers gilded along the corridor.

<http://www.velvetpawofasquith.com/alchemyists>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas Corfield was born in London several years ago, definitely before last Thursday. This was a good year for all concerned, and for him in particular, because without it, later years would mean little. He owes a lot to that first year, and now lives because of it in undisclosed locations after having successfully absconded from probation. Although he finds making friends difficult, this is only because no one likes him. Including his mother, who didn't bother giving him a name until he was nine. His solicitor describes him as having an allergy to apostrophes and an aversion to punctuation that borders on pathological. This makes the popularity of his books all the more remarkable. At least it would if there was any. But there isn't. So it doesn't. He was recently interviewed in Joomag's Meals of Food magazine, which didn't help anyone.

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