

A Reversal of Fortunes

a *Carnival Row* fanfic

by **Rodo**

for *alchemise*

“I’M SORRY, BUT we can’t put on your plays any more.”

The sentence haunted him. It was his worst nightmares, all rolled into one short sentence. There had been more, of course. “The classics just draw more of a crowd,” and “Why don’t you try something a bit more entertaining?” But those were the slighter, later blows, not the first one that had struck him hard. Runyan Millworthy loved his plays, and he didn’t want to write the same superficial, meaningless drivel that the masses seemed to love and that Horatio put so much stock in. And of course, Horatio just had to kick him while he was down: “No, I’m afraid you can’t stay on as an actor either. We already have Multon to take on the elder roles.”

As he sat on a bank in some little park in Ava Leone some hours later, he thought about how time was a cruel mistress. Beside him stood his two suitcases, his clothes were getting shabbier by the day while his beard was getting out of control. Here he was, Runyan Millworthy, once one of the greatest character actors of Mesogea, celebrated from The Burgue to Cibola, famous for his portrayal of Hastur Allweather. Now he was almost sixty; everything he owned he either carried on his person or in one of two suitcases; he had no family, no wealth or valuables and barely enough coin to feed himself for the next week. Just about the only thing he still had were friends, he thought. He’d feel sorry for himself if it hadn’t been a life well lived. As it was, he needed a solution for his current predicament, not to ponder his failures.

But no solution presented itself and so Runyan was left staring into space as the day wore on, or more accurately, he was left staring at the Leonese as they passed him by. Mothers and their children, the odd gentleman with his

sweetheart, and workers who took a shortcut through the park. None stayed for long. The only other people – if one wanted to call them that – who stayed as long as Runyan were a group of kobolds.

Truth be told, Runyan had never bothered to pay any attention to the creatures. Some people kept them as pets, but they were even more independent in spirit than cats. Once, when he'd been a little boy, he'd seen some when his mother had taken him to a zoo. He knew, of course, that they were otherkin, but for some reason he had always thought them more like animals than the almost human faeries he was used to.

These kobolds, however, were free, and clearly very clever creatures. One of them had taken up post on the lap of the statue of an angel. Before him, he had a little cap, and he did his best to mimic the posture of a beggar – outstretched hands and huge, pleading eyes. It looked a little ridiculous with the green skin and the floppy ears, but the little creature wasn't deterred in the slightest. Not even when people stopped to mock him. It took Runyan a while to figure out why.

Whenever someone stopped, whether it was to give the beggar a couple of breadcrumbs or seeds (which was mostly the old women who came to the park to feed doves) or to mock him (young boys, followed by parents or other minders), three other kobolds would creep up behind them with makeshift stilts, or they'd clamber up the target's walking stick, and rifle through their pockets. Over the course of an afternoon, he saw them pilfering handkerchiefs, coins, a pillbox, a pocket watch and some variety of make-up. It was quite entertaining, and Runyan forgot all about his own predicament.

His mood only darkened when the sky did and he remembered that he still had no place to sleep. The park bench it was, then. He was hungry, but he would wait until morning to spend what little he had left. Maybe he should go back to The Burgue, he thought, but that train of thought was cut short when someone moved past him with more purpose in his step than the promenaders usually had. His clothes looked even worse than Runyan's and the burgundy top hat was altogether out of place in what was a middle class neighbourhood. The man came to a halt in front of the kobolds, after giving Runyan a glare that somehow managed to be both indifferent and threatening.

“What have you got for me?” he asked, and the four kobolds scrambled forward. They presented their assortment of loot and the man nodded.

“Here's your payment, then,” he told them, and dropped a little package in

front of them before vanishing with the loot. The kobolds' eyes followed him, then travelled to Runyan. They chattered among themselves, he heard, and must have come to some sort of agreement to ignore him, since they opened their package in full view of the park bench.

When they saw what was in it, their little ears drooped and one of them made a sound that could only be described as a frustrated gargle, although Runyan figured it was some sort of verbal comment that was so alien to human ears it didn't register as speech.

"Not what you hoped for, then?" he asked the kobolds, and all eight, round, glowing eyes swivelled over to him. "I can relate. You work and you work, and in the end you get tossed aside when you're no longer useful."

The eyes continued staring at him, unblinking.

Curious, Runyan finally stood up and stretched his knees and arms, then he walked over to the little creatures which continued to be wary of him. The little package still lay between them and Runyan finally saw what was in it – half a rotten sausage. He made a face.

"I think you'll be better off with the bird feed you begged off the old ladies," he told the kobolds. Maybe it was just his imagination, but they seemed to sigh. They really had rather expressive little bodies, Runyan thought. They gesticulated and hunched, stood straight or puffed up their chests. The faces were different, the language unintelligible, but other than that their species seemed to have a lot in common. One of the kobolds – the beggar – seemed to be the leader of their little group. He stared up at Runyan now and inclined his little head, as if to acknowledge what he had said, as if he wanted to be polite. And in that moment, Runyan had an idea.

"You know, I think I might have an idea on how we can all get ourselves out of the mess we're in right now. Would you be interested in hearing about it?"

The kobolds conferred for a few moments. Then, their leader looked at Runyan again and nodded.

Runyan smiled. Things were looking up. It seemed whenever he thought himself lost, destiny provided new opportunities. Together, they would find a way to put on some of the most innovative plays the world had ever seen. Even though he had only known him for minutes, Runyan already had the feeling that the pretend beggar was made for a stage.