

The following is an excerpt from the short story **Outlaws**.

After a short conversation with a few of their guildmates nearby the edge of the camp, Basil and Lester find themselves peering in through an archway at the interior of an old tree. Though nothing but the trunk remains, it has been hollowed out as a small room of sorts. Now, it lay empty for the two to settle into—save for a pair of messy straw beds laid out on the floor.

“Huh,” Lester muses as he is first to enter. “It’s...cozy?”

When he looks to his companion, he sees Basil holding a hand up to the top of the archway with a furrowed brow. The taller man grumbles. “At least I fit through the door...for now.” He shrugs and follows shortly after Lester.

“We should get a door at some point.” Lester rolls his eyes. He lowers himself as he begins sniffing at the walls to ensure nothing unwanted was present in their new dorm. “But it’ll do. I’m about ready to take a hell of a nap.”

The two begin to settle in on their own, with no words between them for a time. They each set their belongings—at least what little they had with them—on their chosen sides of the room. Occasionally, Basil steals a glimpse of Lester, who was now moving his attention over to the loose straw on his end. He starts gathering some of it together to form a fuller pile when Basil clears his throat and coughs.

“Ah...Les?”

Lester glances over his shoulder at Basil, stepping off the straw that now comprises most of his makeshift bedding.

He sees the shift in Basil’s expression as they come to face one another, though he pretends as if he doesn’t—mostly for himself. Basil gestures to him and says, “You gonna drop the dish—er, *dis-guise*?”

Lester looks down at himself. He can’t help but fold his arms in defiance, taken aback by the question. He shrugs as he turns back up at his companion. “Eventually. Why?”

“You know...you’ve been keeping it up all day. And we’re out of sight now.” Basil cocks his head towards the exit of the dormitory. As he speaks, his voice grows quieter and more sheepish. “I...”

“Yeah?” Lester swallows dryly. He takes a breath and unknowingly holds it as he smiles. Cocking a brow, he tilts his head up at Basil expectantly.

Basil chuckles awkwardly. “I just haven’t seen you.”

At that, the mage involuntarily laughs, unable to hold it back upon hearing the response. He shakes his head and shoots up to his feet, pacing around their small room. His lengthy tail sweeps across the floor behind him, its motions growing more erratic as he reconsiders his response.

‘*Why did I laugh...?*’ Lester looks back over to his companion. His uneasy grin quickly fades to a frown as he sees Basil now facing away from him.

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With a quiet, nigh inaudible sigh, Lester flexes his digits, holds up his hand, and snaps his fingers. When he lays his boots down to walk back towards Basil's side of the room, he stares down at his ragged and torn clothes—a stark contrast to the fanciful attire he had boasted but a moment ago. Bearing an entirely different appearance to the one he had been flaunting about for the day, Lester finds a comfortable spot on Basil's bedding to seat himself and clear his throat.

At that, Basil turns his head just slightly to eye him. Lester brushes his messy bangs from his face and he straightens himself out with a look of indifference. "Alright...here. Happy?"

A small, yet warm smile slowly appears across Basil's face as he gets on one knee to bring himself to eye-level with Lester. "You didn't have to."

"Yeah, well...I did," the mage murmurs.

Basil reaches a hand over and hovers it by the side of Lester's face. When he's given a subtle nod of approval, he places it just beneath his companion's jaw and carefully thumbs his cheek. "You feel okay?"

"Why wouldn't I?" Lester does not smile, though he uses most of his effort to keep himself from doing so. His mouth becomes a tilted line as he shrugs again and averts his gaze down and to the side. "I'm fine."

Basil gives him a nod and a low "hmm" and he mumbles out, "Okay. I'm sorry."

As Basil's hand leaves him, he finds himself finally breathing out. He relaxes, though keeps up the illusion that he had not tensed at all to his companion. Lester watches as Basil then stands again and picks up the rucksack that contains both of their belongings from the city. The mage feels almost disappointed as Basil turns his attention away from him, but the tightness in his chest keeps him unable to speak out again. 'Sorry? For what?'

When he finally does speak again, Lester slowly makes his way over to his own bed again to begin smoothing out the spots where the hay becomes knotted. Without looking over again, he ekes out, "No...I should be thanking you. Thought I was toast back there, honestly."

Basil does not look back either. "Back in the forest?"

There are a few, agonizingly long seconds between Basil's clarifying question and Lester's response. Lester puts on his best, confident smirk in an attempt to spur himself to mend his tone. "Yeah. Back in the forest. Not much of a sprinter myself, honestly."

"Oh, I know." Basil responds much quicker than Lester, though there is some hesitation in his voice. "I wasn't just gonna leave you. I was worried."

Lester's smirk falters. He squeezes his eyes shut and takes in Basil's words one-by-one. Somehow, it hurt him to hear the sympathy in his voice.

"We're innit'ta—" Basil pauses and shakes his head as he stumbles over his words again. He enunciates his corrections, as always. "In it...together now."

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Lester grows self-conscious, his eyes darting anxiously from spot to spot along the floor he's staring at. "In *what* exactly...?" Lester stammers as he turns around, trying desperately to keep up his facade of being in control of his emotions in the moment. He stands up again, in an attempt to seem tall though Basil easily towers over him. "I mean, we left port together, sure. And everything that happened back in the city...but what are we supposed to be, Basil?"

Basil, who is now settling into his bed, lays down on his side. Eventually, he ventures to meet the mage's eyes again, his own gentle gaze filled with conviction. "We can be anything you want."

The response surprises Lester. He purses his lips and frowns, unable to form his words properly as he murmurs, "I..." and he lowers himself down to a seated position with his legs tucked up towards his chest. Eventually leaning back and laying his own head down against the straw, he sighs. "Wh-what about...just partners, then? Y'know, it's just with my brains and your brawn, we'd be pretty damn good at this whole 'outlaws' thing. Like today? And..."

Lester promptly ceases his rambling, and trails off as he hears Basil chuckling.

When he looks over, Basil places a hand atop his own chest and clenches his fingers into a fist. "Partners," he echoes, a fond smile across his face. "Together."

"T—" Lester swallows dryly. He attempts to return the expression with all that he can muster. "Together."