

*Another blank page lined my journal at this juncture, aside from a few stars I had doodled. I remembered it clearly, even without the visual reminder. That outfit. Her intention to become part of the show. Despite the slideshow of horrible images that ran through my mind, that time on the beach shone out amongst them. The sound of the waves lapping at the shore. Warmth of the sun. How radiant and full of hope she was. How we both were. The System had ways of correcting that.*

I dropped to the sand once the chair reappeared and went into my Inventory, my grin maintaining. "My new ability lets me make things invisible for ten seconds."

"Not clothes, I hope?" She narrowed her eyes at me.

"Nothing... equipped." Somehow, I managed to maintain eye contact, my grin only slightly wavering.

She turned her head to look back at Wolf. "We should make a move soon. But first, you should teach me something."

I screwed my face up in response. Although I wanted to ascertain some key principles of the order of magic and ease her into the whole journey, I also didn't want her glaring me to death all day. My fingers rubbed at the bridge of my nose. "I suppose, first off... you're an Oathwarden - you never mentioned what your oath was to ward."

"You." she stated plainly and didn't change expression.

My brow furrowed, but I didn't have much to say, slightly caught off guard by the simple and rather personal answer.

"What?" She scowled. "You think you can tank a sword through your guts without some kind of divine intervention? I'm already embarrassed enough about last night. Let's not dwell on the details."

Quickly, I nodded, if only because I was keen to not address anything to do with any of that until necessary. Today had already been a rollercoaster, and I was beginning to feel like my heart had given out in the night and this was a last dream before I headed into the light. It made a change from being my broken skull; I supposed.

"Okay." I shook my head to get the train back on the tracks. "What about Smite Shot - is that specifically a bow ability?"

Her brow furrowed as she looked through her System windows. "It says... it's a projectile attack."

I smiled. *Silly System*. "And what is a projectile attack?"

The simple answer popped into her head before the more out of the box ones tumbled in. I handed her over a knife.

She turned to the side, a scowl of concentration along her face as she held the weapon's sharp end between her fingers. It would probably take more effort than the way she had been doing it innately, but...

Ren leaned back and then launched the dagger, a radiant light illuminating it as it careened over the beach before landing in the loose sand with a small pulse of energy.

"Holy shit, trickster." She turned to me, either impressed or perhaps expecting that to have been more difficult.

"Obviously not as damaging as an arrow would have been." I held up a finger. "But..."

I turned away and walked to the water sloshing up the damp sand as she watched me. Empty bottle came up, and I filled it with sea water, putting a cork in the end. Humming to myself, I stepped over and held it out for her. Some apprehension in her face, but understanding the process.

"Entangling shot," I offered.

She repeated the same actions, this time the green and golden light swirling around the thrown bottle before it broke on the sands ahead. Vines wriggled about the empty area and then sunk away amidst a wet patch.

"Now imagine that bottle was filled with poison gas or oil." I grinned.

"Root them and cause more damage." She cupped her chin in thought, looking out to where the skill had landed.

Again, not as damaging nor as far-reaching as an arrow would have been - but the spark was set and I could see the possibilities whirring around in her head. I held my hand out for her to shake. "To being the greatest magician duo in the world."

She eschewed the extended offering and moved in for a brief hug. Already, she had moved away before I had a chance to process. She dipped her hat to hide half her face as she moved away. "Embarrassing acts come in threes. Better to get it over with. Ready to go see how we'll die today?"

My brain clicked into place, still unsure as to what was happening today. "I don't know. I'm starting to get a taste for living." Rubbing at my eyes, I turned to face the road, where a familiar figure was slouched against the wall and talking to Wolf.

We exchanged glances and walked back across the sands toward Hannah.

"I knew it'd only be a matter of time," she clucked her tongue and grinned.

"That Ren would become my protégé?" I blurted out before anyone else got a word in. "It was inevitable. Did *you* want to join us?"

"Pass." The shapeshifter pulled a face and frowned. "Wolf was telling me you ran into some trouble yesterday?"

There had been the thought that Hannah may have tipped our position off to the Crimson Shadow, but even with her confidence, she wouldn't be so overt in our face about it if that was the case. Mostly, I felt I just didn't want to be wrong about her.

"Group of five ambushed us outside the Dungeon exit." Ren crossed her arms.

Hannah whistled. "Shit, yeah, that sounds like a death trap. But you managed to escape okay, you lost them?"

"We killed them." I shrugged at her visual disbelief. "Mixture of our luck and their arrogance."

"Good eating, though," Wolf shrugged and laid back down on the warm stone road.

She stood, working her jaw and trying to chew through the truths she had trouble accepting. Eventually, she had no reason to think what we were saying wasn't true, and she shrugged it away. "I've got the coordinates on Hadrian's camp, if you can pay."

Ren raised an eyebrow at me, and I nodded. She withdrew the Token and handed it over, and the shapeshifter sent the location to our Maps.

"I'm warning you that I don't know their full numbers and power. This is just where the rat is holed up. I couldn't hang about for too long because they have magic that could detect what I really am." She rubbed at one of her cat ears. "I'm going to stay away, probably head west to see what's going on there."

"I understand. Staying safe out there is the most important thing." I looked past her to the road leading up to the town. It would have been very impressive if a new Player had teleported to the beach, which I was faux floating atop the invisible chair. Another time, perhaps. "We know that the Lady is past the Golden Fields now, but we want to clear up the area here before moving on."

Hannah pulled an even more exaggerated face. "You'd risk death for what? When your prey is—"

I held up a hand. "How are we supposed to grow an audience with the trash here killing them off?"

She scowled and looked between my devious grin and the stoic glare of the elf. "Whatever," she threw her arms up. "Just follow through. I could use the continued Tokens, and to breathe a little easier in this area. Maybe if you can really do it, I'll follow you to the next area."

With a nod, that was the end of our business meeting. The woman transformed into a cat and scarpereed up the road to the town. I watched her leave, for some reason expecting something to happen - but nothing did.

Ren sighed and leaned against the bear, patting him on the shoulder. "I tried to get Wolf to wear a little hat, too, but he wasn't having it."

I beamed at them both. Despite the danger on our doorstep, the day had been... good? I had never considered having an understudy before. While Ren didn't really have the natural gifts that the System was keen to give out, there wasn't anyone else I'd rather have as my equal. We'd already built the trust, killed for each other, saved each other's life... and hugged a few times - my fuzzy brain was quick to add. The performing tricks part was the easy bit once we had more time to workshop.

"You two check out the Quest board?"

They shook their heads. "Oh, I did spend some of your share of the gold on supplies." Ren tilted her head. "Health Potions, Bandages, and so many bullshit things."

I frowned and tilted my head. "You have my attention, Ren."

She sucked her teeth and looked upwards, narrowing her eyes to try to remember everything. "Nails, parchment paper, a hammer, pliers, three different colors of paint, caltrops, rope, yarn, a shovel-"

I held up my hand. "You had me at whatever the first thing was. My brain will literally explode if you give me too many options to think about... but thank you."

Her eyes smiled. "Shall we go murder some Shadows, then?"

With a sigh, I nodded. It was a shame to leave this snapshot of idyllic comfort, but greater things drew us to harsher times. Even hiding out here and enjoying our time, there was a chance they'd track us down and send people to kill us amongst the town.

"See any other Players here?"

She shook her head. "Either they have moved on or... *moved on*." She drew a finger across her neck, just in case I didn't catch the difference. I did.

"Let's go then, and you'll need to tell me every skill and what their exact description is along the way." She nodded as I continued. "We'll have you full of bullshit in no time."

Wolf groaned as he stood to his feet, shaking himself off. "If you expect me to do tricks, then you are... well, you best have enough food to convince me."

I raised an eyebrow at the elf, and she nodded eagerly. Ren had thought of everything.

Other than to hand in her thief Quest and level up, apparently. Apparently, meeting halfway also meant she would be a little more slack on things. We did so and took the three from the noticeboard. Even if we had no intention of completing them at this stage, it would be handy to have them ready in case we stumbled upon the targets. Plus, we could equally dead soon, anyway.

With one last glance at relative safety, we set back out into the woods as Ren began to list off her current abilities and passives. They certainly didn't have the intentional flare that mine did.

“Hmm.” Eventually, I rubbed my chin in consideration. “Not a lot to work with there. The System has you pegged to your role quite well.”

Ren looked glum at my take on it. “The ability I received at level seven lets me imbue a projectile with an elemental bonus, but only one time per element per day.”

My brow furrowed. “So you could throw a bottle of oil *already on fire* to explode where it lands? Probably plenty of other interactions I’d have to think about.”

She nodded and looked around. We had traveled a decent distance from the town, and as beautiful as the woods were in this weather, we were only stepping ever closer toward the fight against the Shadows.

“Small breakfast stop? I picked up more coffee, too.” From her Inventory she withdrew a full jar of the stuff to hand toward me.

“Oh.” I stepped back from her. “You best look after it - I, uh, will over indulge otherwise and you don’t want to see me when I’m super wired up.”

“Delegating your coffee making to me, huh?” Her eyes narrowed as she set up the grill, before her face then softened at seeing my brief panic. “We have a saying in elvish that means ‘bound by trauma’ or ‘deathforged’. I believe it’s common for adventuring groups to grow tight knit due to this.”

I nodded and looked over at Wolf, who sat down after a stretch and a yawn. That certainly seemed possible. We had shared the near-death experiences, the bloodshed, and rising above odds. It certainly beat out the surface-level conversations I’d have with my previous colleagues or acquaintances.

Maybe this could be even more.

"I have a bear saying," Wolf added, "that means feed me or become the food."

"Poetic," I smiled.

Ren withdrew some meat and threw it toward him, the slightest of smiles at the edge of his muzzle.

“Say, before we all go off and die...” I drew out a chair to sit on as the kettle started to boil. “What’s one of the best memories you have of your previous world?” I gestured toward the bear first, as he had been quiet as of late and I didn’t want to distract Ren from making my coffee.

He scratched at the underside of his chin for a moment as he finished chewing on his snack, trying to cast his mind back to when he was a normal bear. “When I was a cub, I had two siblings. A sister and a brother. My sister was poorly and passed at a young age, but I recall a time when we were all together, snuggled against our mother. Warmth and safety.”

I gave him a soft smile. Perhaps one of the reasons he didn't mind us using him as a bed to rest up against in the night. My eyebrow raised to the elf as she passed me over a mug of steaming salvation. "Ren?"

"Probably my family dog I had as a child. Apparently, I never smiled so much as when she was around. You, Max?"

My mind was still trying to imagine the younger elf beaming at whatever type of dog she had. It was hard to parse and set me back in coming up with my own memories. The flap of pages only half filled brought up a few of my shows or points in my career, before the inevitable settled into my mind.

"My grandparents on my dad's side were always into the weird and occult. They had an old book on magical tricks - somewhat taboo back in the day as magicians were quite tight-lipped about their tricks." I started down at my drink. "But I picked some things up, and my first ever 'performance' was for my mother. Still remember the sparkle of... joy and pride in her eyes even as I did just a handful of basic things unsuccessfully."

Ren nodded at me. "Just imagine how impressed she'd be with you now." She handed me a bread roll that she had put cheese in and melted on the grill.

I tried to imagine it. Remembered her smile and the kind words. But it still didn't feel like I was doing enough.