

*The scene had been set. Murderers. Vigilantes in a way, trying to wipe the filthy stains of those intent on ruining the System in this world. Some of these stains were more stubborn than others. A little bit of elbow grease, in the form of personal hardship. It was an acceptable price to pay if we could ever complete our goal. Even after all this time, the visual of those poor souls at the outpost had stuck with me. Not the last horror to hang its coat up on the rack inside my mind, but one of the first to truly weigh on me.*

Ren rose her bow back up at the woman. "Stand perfectly still, otherwise the next one goes through your skull."

The shapeshifter narrowed her eyes but stayed put, only wrapping her injured tail around herself so she could hold and nurse it. Whatever her combat abilities may be, she didn't fancy her chances against dodging a second arrow.

"What are you doing here?" I asked as I crossed my arms.

The reason was clear enough by the scowl on her face. "*Somebody* plied me with a fake Token, so I came to leverage a real one from them." Her green eyes looked around the outpost. "What about you?"

"We came here to use the outpost, but found it burned to the ground by the Crimson Shadow." I gestured with my hand and she looked over to see their marking. Her expression sunk, but I still had to ask the next question. "Did you tell them about us once you realized we had tricked you?"

"No." She shook her head. "You called my bluff. *Congratulations*. You're still assholes, though."

I bowed. "Guilty. That was all me though, so aim your ire here. We're pretty on-edge right now, so what will it take to smooth this over?"

"Two Tokens."

Impassively, I turned to Ren. Her arrow was raring to go, and currently to my lagging mind, that seemed like an easy solution to our current problem. I didn't want to be like the Shadows, despite the call of the void. We needed to be... pragmatic, sure. Cautious, even. But we shouldn't chase them down the dark path, lest we lose the actual warmth worth fighting for amongst cold hearts. Still, I wasn't eager to give up the power we had bled for. Earned.

"How about your life?" I grinned.

"You wouldn't."

My grin persisted. "Did you want to call *our* bluff?"

She looked at the three of us and sighed. "Fine. No use having information if everyone wants me dead. I was just going to guilt trip you into paying up."

I stepped over closer to Ren and leaned over to whisper in her ear, perhaps a lot closer than I had originally intended. Told her my intentions, and she gave me a brief nod of acceptance. Wolf... I figured he would be indifferent, so I broke protocol and didn't ask his opinion.

"Hannah, how would you like to help us fight against the Crimson Shadow?"

She pulled a face and stuck her tongue out in faux disgust. "I'm not much of a fighter, so I'd rather not sign my own death warrant."

"Not as a fighter, but as a scout. We can always use information, and we'd actually pay you for the efforts." I had told Ren that the Tokens would come out of my share if necessary, but good information could keep us alive. She knew as much that we were still mostly blind in this area - knowing how bad the threat was and where could keep us out of harm's way until we were ready.

She swirled her shorter tail around. "You want to... employ me?"

I shrugged and let her word it how she wanted. Currently, we held all the cards. There was also the feeling that my senses had been overworked from the overbearing smells around us and had numbed. It wasn't the nicest of places to hold negotiations.

Hannah worked her jaw and bared her teeth - sharper than a normal humans. "*Fine*. If you are going to unfuck the woods, then I'd rather help than get in the way."

"Perfect!" I beamed, and with a glance, Ren lowered her bow. I brought down my hat and pulled a Power Token from it.

All eyes on me, I flipped it into the air straight vertically, then reached back into my hat again. The hell-dove flew up from my hand as I withdrew it, catching the Token in mid air. The bird then flew it over to the shapeshifter, who caught it as it was dropped.

Ren was glaring at me in my peripheral. "*You are ceaseless*," she murmured.

I was. Part of it was my compulsion to constantly be a showman, regardless of my own feelings or wants. It was expected of me. The other part of me reveled in it, perhaps in the same way gamblers chased the high of a win. I too now sought the dopamine of seeing the Dazzle icons pop up.

"Anything else we should investigate before we leave?" I turned to her properly now, addressing her as the Party leader rather than the over-the-top magician.

The elf shook her head. "Nothing more to see here."

Hannah was still eyeing up the Power Token to ensure it was real and not one of my other tricks. Consuming it would be the easiest test, but I didn't want to seem overbearing so soon into our working relationship to pressure her into validating it. We had nothing to prove.

"Let's head back into the woods to discuss?" I gestured off to the side toward the entrance. Now that she had what she wanted, there was the possibility she could run and never return,

but I had a feeling she wouldn't be satisfied if there was the possibility of gaining more left on the table.

She nodded, and I pat Wolf on the side to get him to follow along. He may have an even dimmer view of death and destruction than us being so disjointed from humanity, but he looked like the smells of the place had become oppressive and his eyes were unfocused. Perhaps he was trying to work his System, which would also explain the sour expression on his face.

Without ceremony, we left the place behind. At least, physically. I'm not sure my brain truly accepted or processed what we had seen. Now I just ached for vengeance, or some manner of justice. A couple of minutes later, our feet had taken away from the remains of the outpost and we stood amongst some trees in the waning light of the evening. It was cooler and the fresher air was a relief, even if it made me feel more tired.

"So, what are the terms?" the shapeshifter asked.

Understandably, she was a little put off at having to stand before us three. Wolf was imposing enough on his own, with the glare of the elf, and... whatever I had going on. I rubbed my chin and looked at Ren. "I'd say the most important thing is, don't die?"

The elf nodded and narrowed her eyes at the cat-woman. "A dead scout is a worthless scout."

"Secondly," I continued. "We mostly need information on their campgrounds, any bases, and their movements. If you can work out Classes or Levels then you get a smiley face on your end of quarter peer review."

She rolled her eyes at this. "So just somehow find you every so often, give you coordinates and anything else I can safely get?"

"I can't promise you a Token every time you return, but we'll find some way to compensate you fairly."

Ren tilted her head and shot a glance at me before looking at Hannah. "If you could find out their actual motives, that'd be nice, too."

Of course. Evil for the sake of it usually only happened in fairy-tales. On the small scale, burning down an outpost or killing a group of Players could easily be the actions of someone sadistic or malicious - but there had to be an end goal of the group as a whole. What did the Lady want, and why did it involve so much wholesale violence?

"Sure," Hannah exhaled, "I'll see what they like for breakfast too if it helps?"

I nodded slowly. She was being sarcastic, but I was sure I could do something with poisoning or switching out ingredients. "*Anything* you can get will be useful."

"Alright. Other than the camp I told you about, I know of two other groups. There's a small one that moves about a lot. Like their own scouts, but more violent. There's also a larger one down South past the town. Lot's of activity there in the past couple of days, I'll probably

head there soon to see what they're doing." She turned to leave. "I'm still pissed about my tail, but I'm glad it wasn't my head."

Ren worked her jaw. "For what it's worth, I am sorry."

Hannah waved her off as she departed. "You can owe me an ale. Meet you back at the town if you're not dead by then."

After two dozen steps, she turned into a cat and vanished into the bushes beyond our vision. A few moments of silence followed before the elf turned to me.

"You think we can trust her?"

"For now." I took a deep breath and then gave her a smile. "She doesn't look to have a Party, so she is perhaps just a lost soul in this world as we were." Partly I wondered if we should consider offering her a Party invite. She wasn't so eager to engage in violence as we were, however. We couldn't provide the safety she needed in the direct sense.

She narrowed her eyes at me, but gave me a nod, turning once more to look past the sparse canopy. "It'll be dark soon."

The statement didn't seem to have a follow-up coming, which I took to mean she was waiting for my lead for our next steps. I gave Wolf a pat on his side. "No point getting our brains bashed out wandering around in the dark. Camp tonight, Dungeon tomorrow, then head back to town where Hannah will hopefully have the actual location of the Shadows." Hopefully the dungeon would give us some power worth the effort, too.

"No campfire tonight, then." Ren glanced backward at the outpost. "We also don't want to draw any attention to ourselves."

I nodded. There was something comforting about the warmth and light of a fire, but after seeing the burned-out ruins, I was less inclined to put myself beside the destructive force and invite whoever was in the area to join us.

With little else to say, we ventured away from the site. Anger still rolled around inside me, but it needed to cool. Riding our emotions into battle would sharpen the edges of our blades, but also just as easily get us in over our heads. Currently, I was hoping to keep mine on my shoulders, even if the System was keen for me to dash it upon every hard surface in my vicinity.

As the light darkened across the sky and the twin moons began to show themselves, we eventually found a suitable enough spot to hold up for the night. A shallow cave set into an outcropping of rocks where there was just enough room for Wolf to curl up and blend in to the shadows and obscure our presence. We could squeeze in beside him and be hidden from the outside world, to a degree.

"Pretty cozy," I murmured, shuffling in after Ren, between the bear and the cold rock wall.

"Reminds me of the dirt hole I used to hide in." Ren had sat up against the warm body of our other Party member, facing the side. "Not exactly a fond memory, though."

I sat down almost right beside her. "Here, it's pretty chilly in here." From my Inventory I withdrew a blanket to share across us. From within this nook, only the barest amount of moonlight shone through.

"What a fucking day," she sighed, sinking into what warmth she could.

With a smile, I looked up at the low ceiling. "Yeah. Plenty worse to come, I'm sure."

"Sounds like it's been bad enough to erode your positive attitude, trickster."

The mental images of the charred corpses threw themselves in front of my mind before I turned my head to her. She looked as exhausted as I felt. She put on a good show of being cold and stoic, but the trials of the day wore on her the same as it did me. Honestly, right now I could barely conjure up a true smile, let alone put on a performance up to my normal standards.

"Can't all be fun and games," I eventually relented. Straightened my head and closed my eyes, only the briefest difference in darkness compared to having them open - yet still, it was relaxing.

"Not all, sure. Some of it has been."

"Hard to tell with you," I smiled, hoping she could see it in the low light to know I was just trying to rile her up. There was silence for a moment before she spoke again.

"There was one guy who said I'd look a lot prettier if I smiled more."

"Did you stab him?"

"What? No, that's a bit extreme, Max." I heard her sigh.

Sleep was trying to get me to hurry up, the exhaustion and emotional turmoil of the day finally allowing my brain to turn into mush and rest. "*I would have killed him for you,*" I murmured.

I didn't hear her response, as the darkness took me just as soon as the thought had slunk from my mouth.

Actual rest didn't come easily, though. Between all-too-vivid dreams, I found myself waking in a brief panic every hour or two at any sound or imagined movement. Heart beating and tired eyes trying to focus on the darkness to see if something untoward was nearby. Nothing. One time was because Ren had slid over and her head was resting on my shoulder. The next time I awoke, she was back in her normal position, so I was unsure if that really happened or my half-lucid dream state was running roughshod over my grip on reality.

How I wished for my own bed. A proper thing of comfort and peace. Even the worst of the hotels over the years were a step above a hole in the ground with a giant animal to rest upon. A life without demons and murder, where everyone praised my efforts instead of called me a dickbag.

*“Hey, Max? Time to get up.”*

My eyes cracked open like eggshells as I turned to the elf, trying to prod me out of the way.

“Shit, you look like garbage. Get out of the way and I’ll fix you up.”

I groaned and leveraged myself from the shallow indent, body aching and stiff. Hopefully, by fixing me up, she meant she was just going to break my neck and put me out of my misery. The morning sunlight burned at my retinas and I grasped at my eye sockets in hopes my brain wasn’t about to rupture itself out.

“See, the trick is not to tense your muscles.”

My glare escaped from between my fingers as I watched her clamber out, too. Her hair burst into radiant gold as soon as she stepped into the light, and despite her soft scowl, she seemed all too glad to be existing. It was almost enough to melt away at my thorns, but not quite.

She popped out her grill, which was enough for the bear to pop up to his paws in expectation, amber eyes wide.

“This is not really my sort of thing, but you look like you could use it.” From her Inventory, she withdrew a glass bottle and handed it over.

Cyanide, maybe? A Sleep potion? Some manner of Healing miracle?

No, something even more valuable and magical.

*Coffee.*