

*Ever since my arrival in this world, I had a target on my back. Fame acted as a multiplier. As a magician, I had my share of fans who took things a little too far. Put me on a podium too high, thought of me as something greater than I really was, and wanted me to fulfill their odd delusions. None wanted death - even my detractors weren't so cold. So now, for the world to grow a crop of beings that wanted my existence erased, the only option was to fight back. Be greater than every new threat. One step ahead. The exercise was tiring, but I could do with the cardio.*

As soon as I saw the silvered reflection of something peek through the gap of slowly widening pitch black, I brought Card Fan up in front of the bed. It flickered and dissipated as something struck it, and then I was up.

I leaped over Ren to the floor on the other side as the door burst open fully, a cloaked figure enveloped in shadow looming forth at me. Darkness covered the room as something blocked the open window, and the growls of the Hellhound I had dropped on my side of the bed caught the second would-be assassin before they could fully enter.

Why I had dove straight into the danger was beyond me. To protect the elf? As the first figure leaped toward me, hands both full of sharp steel, I could hear the Oathwarden roll awake, standing atop the bed behind me.

My card went out, the bright purple glow illuminating the room as it skirted past my assailant's head. He flinched slightly from the light, but grinned wildly at my miss as the dagger in his right hand cut through the air towards me. My [Dagger of Luck] managed to block it, my arm buckling from the force - leaving my side open for his off-hand swing.

"Oh, look what's behind your ear," I hissed, as my card made the return journey. Split in two, it came back past him, cutting through his hood and lopping both ears off before disappearing. The light of them briefly illuminated his shocked face as he went to clutch at his head. I turned to the side as Ren sprung from the bed over me, landing her dagger into him and knocking them both to the floor.

Another card spun over my hand as I faced the struggling window-killer. My Hellhound had a grip on his leather trousers, not letting him abort the attempted murder. He was left stuck halfway through the window, his hands clasped against the frame in trying to gain leverage. My magic projectile removing some of his fingers turned the tide in favor of my canine glowing crimson.

Ren stood from the corpse of our first attacker and moved over to flick the lantern back on. Her nightwear was now soaked through with blood, but we had been one heavy sleep away from that being her own. Her eyes burned with fury as the second of the men slumped heavily onto the floor, clutching at his hand.

I kneeled down and pulled his hood back. A panicked man, sweaty and pale. His dark hair was cut short and scars ran down one side of his face. I grabbed his ear and twisted it - not really intending to torture the man, but giving enough pain to get him to focus.

"This a hobby of yours, or someone put you up to it?" My voice was considerably calm, despite the circumstances.

“Can’t say,” he spluttered, wincing from my grasp.

I raised an eyebrow at Ren, who was now in her normal adventuring gear. Being woken up mid-sleep had done nothing good to her mood. “That means the latter then.”

“Lady in Red.” The elf rolled her eyes. “She knew we’d likely be here soon.”

“Can’t say,” the man repeated. The Hellhound moved closer to sniff at his face.

I clucked my tongue and tried to gather the thoughts bouncing around inside my head. As the adrenaline wore off, I found out how tired I really was, and how little I cared for this man attempting to murder us.

“There’s a letter on this one.”

I turned my gaze to see Ren looting the body of the first. “Dibs on the crossbow.”

She exhaled and stood, showing the rectangle of sealed paper. It had a picture of a top hat with an arrow through it on one side.

“Our first fan mail,” I grinned, and turned back to the assassin to avoid any potential glare. “Hey, I don’t usually do crowd work these days... but I bet we can find something to loosen that tongue, right?”

“If you are reading this, you have thwarted the hired goons I sent after you. I am not surprised if that is the case. If you desire to chase me down, I warn you that will be a fatal error. This is your one and only warning. Lady in Red.”

“Ah.” I shrugged. “I suppose we don’t really need you after all, then.” I released his ear and stood while he dropped to the floor. “All yours, boy.”

The hound leaped atop him, tearing through his neck.

My right eye twitched as I turned back to the elf. A little heartless of me, but it was clear this was a dog eat dog world. Or dog eat assassin world. “I suppose we won’t get our deposit back?” I grimaced at the amount of blood now soaked through the room.

“I saw you trying to tip the barman last night.” Ren shook her head. “Things don’t work like that here.”

I flipped my dagger into the air and clicked my fingers, the weapon vanishing as it went into my Inventory. Unnecessary flourish, but it felt good. “Sorry to wake you.”

“Ass. I should be thankful you were awake.” Her brow furrowed as she looked across the room. “You weren’t doing anything weird, were you?”

“Light sleeper.” I shrugged. “I’m often traveling, and new places disorientate me.” What I wouldn’t give for a permanent place to settle down in, have a bed of my own to return to every night. She had a point though. I should have been up practicing some magic tricks.

“Thoughts on this, trickster?” She held up the opened letter.

I deflated and closed my tired eyes to think. We were being offered a potential out. Live a life less dangerous and more fruitful. Part of what Ren had said yesterday stuck out at me. How this wasn't really my battle. I had been along for the ride and needn't throw myself in front of danger just because she had an axe to grind.

"We should call her bluff." With a sigh, I opened my eyes again. "I don't trust her to leave us alone, nor would she have turned a new leaf and not begun starting a new dangerous scheme already."

Ren shrugged. "Alright, if that is your plan, I agree to follow you."

I narrowed my eyes and paused for a second. "Oh... very clever. You made me choose for myself what I wanted to do. Do you agree with my conclusion, though?"

"I would have let you know if not. If you had decided not to pursue her, then we would have parted ways." The elf yawned into the back of her arm. "*Fuckers* for disturbing our sleep."

"She deserves to die for that alone." I smiled wryly.

Her scowl was more tired than anything, and she relented to sitting at the edge of the bed. "I'm not expecting you to be the leader, just as you shouldn't expect me to be either."

A duo-act. An interesting proposition that I hadn't fully considered. It was clear to me that Ren would be more than an assistant, and it was probably a fault of mine to want to shuffle my new contacts into the boxes of my old life. She didn't need the dramatic flair I did to be a hero - there was the more pragmatic business-sense that kept me on the rails.

"Point noted." I sat on the edge of the bed at the side closest to me. "An equal partnership, then."

She didn't respond at first, and as the silence continued, I started to wonder if she had fallen asleep. Certainly, I felt like it. Something about the bloodied corpses in the room had me on edge, however. The hound whined at me, his time just about up. I gestured for him to go say goodbye to the elf, and saw her pet him on the head before he went. Not asleep.

My eyes went to the window. The night sky had now taken on a deep blue tone, the first sign that a new day may be soon starting. "Looks like a couple of hours till dawn. You able to get back to sleep?"

"Nope."

"Me neither. Want to get started on finding a Quest?"

She sighed. "Beats sitting around dead bodies. I had hoped the first night on the mainland could have been..."

"Less stressful?"

"Mmm. There's... no, never mind." She stood up and scowled at the dead bodies. "You wanted this?" From her Inventory she brought forth a crossbow.

“Ah, yeah!” I stood and moved over to her, placing my hands on the weapon - but as I went to take it, she held a tight grip and stared me in the face.

“Why is it you can take a life so easily?”

As disarming as her bright eyes were, I didn't think my explanation of being two Max's' mixed would earn me a reprieve from the perfectly reasonable questioning. I was just a showman, after all. Murder should be leaving me a frazzled mess of sweat and vomit in the corner.

“Would you have me any other way?”

Her eyes tried to read my face. A question to answer, a question, and something not as dazzlingly annoying as I tended to be.

“As long as you don't lose sight of yourself.” She relinquished the crossbow.

I stowed it away in my Inventory, making a mental note to work out how it functioned later on. “If I become a monster, Ren, I'd hope you'd be the one to put an arrow through my neck.”

“I will.” She nodded, an impassive frown across her face. “And I hope you'd do the same for me.”

“I promise.”

We stood staring at each other awkwardly for a few seconds before I cleared my throat. “Ah, fresh air?”

She nodded and gestured towards the still-open doorway.

Having an intangible Inventory space to store everything certainly made checking-out easier. With one last glance around the room, I led us out into the hallway and then down the stairs. My mind buzzed like a beehive, some thoughts about Ren I'd need to arrange in their proper place when I was by myself, so she wasn't close enough to hear my inner monologue going full tilt.

The barman was still standing in the same place, which was remarkably creepy.

“Morning travelers, I hope your stay was pleasant.”

“It... sorry, we were assailed by assassins in the night and they left a mess in the room.” From down here, he would have been able to hear the thuds on the floor and growling of my hound... that it hadn't prompted him into action made sense, but left me with an uncomfortable feeling.

“Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.” His brow furrowed. “There has been a lot of that lately.”

“Assassinations in the tavern?” Ren asked with a scowl, stepping around to the front of the bar with me.

“Lot's of bandits and thieves. There should be information on the Town Board.”

I nodded slowly. There was an uncanny amount of understanding mixed with reading from a script. The nature of our night's stay was washed away by the hint that the town had some issues and we should point our adventuring noses in the way of a noticeboard of Quests. It was all so... predictable?

"That'll be our first stop, then." I sighed and raised an eye to Ren. "I'd rather gain a bit of power today rather than chase footsteps fading in the sand."

"Agreed," she said with a nod, "but less poetic."

The barman leaned forward towards us. "If it's power you're after, rumor has it there is a dungeon out in the Silent Forest that holds Power Tokens." He moved back to his default position and lifted a mug to clean out.

"A dungeon," I echoed. "Sounds... gloomy."

"We'll hit that if we get another Quest in that area, we need to be efficient about this."

Something about it drew me in. A subterranean lair built by sinister purposes and filled with all manner of devious traps and monsters from the darkest shadows of existence. It was a place I needed to conquer - to survive. A badge to affix to my belt to show my achievements. There must be other dungeons in the world, and I wondered if there were any sort of accolades for-

"Max." Ren raised her voice from the front door. "Move already!"