

## 65. Curiosity killed the cat

Randy's tavern was almost empty as the day came to a close. The nearly endless line of job seekers had since dwindled. An exhausted young man with a ponytail rubbed the sleepiness out of his eyes as his final customer for the day reached the bar.

Mary approached the bar, slightly limping while holding two stone slates in her hands; she looked the man up and down and chuckled, "Geez, Randy, you look awful."

Randy rolled his tired and baggy eyes while yawning, "Says the homeless woman. Did you roll your way through the mud to get here?"

Mary looked down at her tattered peasant clothes, stained red with blood and caked in dried mud. The left side of her dress was utterly torn and embarrassingly revealed her undergarments below. She faced Randy with a scowl, "Not only did I survive a near-death experience on my way here, but I also had to stand in line for 5 hours while looking like this! Do you have any idea how itchy I am right now? Wearing these clothes is torture!"

Randy rubbed the bridge of his nose in frustration, "Do you have any right to complain about waiting in line?" He flopped his hand like a dead fish, "I think I have developed arthritis from all this record keeping. I wanted to run a tavern, not a government agency!"

The girl Randy had hired at the start due to her ability to read was slumped against a beer barrel, peacefully snoring away. Randy had managed the workload alone for the last hour. Then, pointing at the sleeping employee, Randy sighed, "Although she was useful, the workload was far too high for only two people. You are older than me. Can you read Mary?" Randy practically had puppy eyes while asking.

Mary shook her head with regret, "Never had the time to learn, always busy with the farm." She muttered as she placed two stone slates on the bar table that separated them; Randy eyed them casually but sat straight when he understood their contents.

### **[Project Angel Tears]**

**Requirements:** Soul Contract with Duke Nightshade

**Description:** ??? Meet the Duke at the Mayor's residence for details.

**Pay:** 10 silver a week

**Punishment:** Death

Randy picked up the slate and inspected it again before looking Mary dead in the eyes, "I have read many slates today, but this is the first with death as a punishment and such a vague description. I suggest you pick another one." Randy then read the other one with slightly less interest.

### **[Blacksmith Tutor]**

**Requirements:** Blacksmithing skills

**Description:** You will hold daily lessons to train aspiring blacksmiths

**Pay:** 1 silver a week + 1 gold per Blacksmith trained

**Punishment:** Loss of reputation

Randy leaned on his arm and yawned again, "I never knew you were into Blacksmithing, Mary? Or is this for your old man at home?"

She nodded, "He can't wield his hammer anymore; his mana circuit crumbled. I told him to stop overworking himself, but he refused to listen."

Randy sighed, "Times were tough back then; we needed the weapons to defend the village from bandits and the forest's monsters. He made a noble sacrifice and the only reason the town stands today is through his efforts."

Mary weakly smiled at Randy's praise for her Father, "Stop speaking like an old man Randy; you're a decade younger than me... I will pass on your kind words." She then looked at the slate that Randy had pushed to the side, "Hey, Randy."

"Yes?"

"What are your opinions on the Duke?"

Randy's face turned serious; he carefully looked around the empty tavern like a meerkat scouting for predators. He then slightly gestured to a side door that led between the bar and drinking area.

Mary held her breath with anxiety as she walked behind the bar and followed Randy through the backdoor.

Randy opened the cellar door with a grunt and climbed down the ladder; Mary followed close behind.

The small dark cellar became dimly illuminated by a glowstone embedded in the ceiling with a snap of his fingers.

"Nifty," Mary commented while inspecting the stone.

Randy looked over his shoulder as he moved two barrels opposite each other "I purchased it when I visited the Capital a while back. Bad idea to have a lit torch in an enclosed space like this." Randy gestured around the small wooden cellar. "Especially with all these wooden barrels of alcohol lying around." He motioned for Mary to sit across from him on a beer barrel.

Randy nervously looked at the cellar's tightly sealed entrance, "Mary, we have known each other a long time; I even see you as my second mother, so I believe I can share some of my thoughts with you... but not all of them. The Duke said he would keep a close 'eye' on me, and I don't wish to push my luck at this stage."

The cellar was cold, and Randy's seriousness sent shivers down Mary's spine. Where had the calm and jolly Randy that occasionally came to her house for lunch gone? But, alas, her curiosity was piqued, so she nodded for him to continue.

Randy leaned back slightly and rubbed his chin, "If I had to describe the Duke in a single word, it would be omniscient. Everything he did felt odd. How can I explain this..."

Randy shifted his body nervously while mulling over his thoughts, "He looked at me as one would an old acquaintance, as if he had seen me before. Not only that, he appraised me too quickly. I could tell that he labelled me as a competent person after such a short exchange of words."

Mary rubbed her hands together to stop them from going numb due to the cold, "Maybe the Duke has good eyes for people?"

"Tools." Randy deadpanned, "He has a good eye for tools, not people. He appraised me for my usefulness to him, not my quality as a person. My opinion on the Duke, you ask? A terrifying leader with the qualities of a tyrant. But it's hard to get a read on him. There's this sense of mystery as if we are all his chess pieces in a bigger scheme. Maybe the dream he sold us is real but comes at a cost." Randy leaned closer and whispered, "That slate you picked has confirmed that suspicion; it outright states the punishment is death. People are essential for tyrants; they are cannon fodder and valuable as labour or slaves. So if he is willing to murder you, he has *something* to hide."

Randy drummed his fingers on his knee in thought, "In a way, I believe he is the most dangerous type of noble. The greedy ones are easy to work with so long as you provide them with money, bootlicking and loyalty to the egotistical ones. But Duke Nightshade? He is already pride incarnate; the way he carried himself showed his ego is above others. It

gave me the impression that he saw me as nothing but a mere animal compared to his majesty. Bribes also won't work; he is giving money to us rather than demanding it shows that either his wealth is beyond imagination or he knows a way to acquire that wealth..."

Randy looked at Mary and grinned, "He is an unchained tyrant. The question you must ask yourself is which side will you take? Accepting a job from him that requires a soul contract essentially binds you to him. If his empire falls, you perish with it. But if it rises to world dominance, you may stand at the forefront in a position you never believed possible."

Mary was stunned by Randy's speech; she secretly felt relieved that Randy had become the 'guild master' rather than the other ruffians of the town. "Thank you, Randy... I will think about it and ask my Father about his thoughts."

Randy nodded and stood up, "I can't lie, Mary, I am rather curious about the secrets the Duke is trying to hide. Perhaps this job will open pandora's box; curiosity killed the cat, as they say."

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The torrential rainstorm raged on as Mary braved the weather to return home. She took an hour to reach her home with only the pale moonlight to guide her through the darkness.

Despite the late hour, an orange glow filled the room. A lit fire crackled and burned in the iron cast furnace, and a rhythmic clang of metal rang through the air, causing Mary to frown.

She quickly returned to her room to freshen up; she felt the blood and mud caked clothes had merged with her skin, and the rainwater drenched her hair, giving it a damp smell.

Wearing fresh clothes and donning an out of shower hairstyle, Mary wandered across the fire-lit room, following the sounds of a smith.

Entering the workshop attached to the house, Mary saw her Father standing over his anvil; sweat covered his brow and soaked his overalls. A sword floated in the air as her Father inspected his work and asked the pink spider on his shoulder some questions, "Little spider, do you like it? This sword should impress the others... yes, yes, you already told me Timmy made the other spider's swanky hats, but I can't make hats."

Mary stood awkwardly in the doorframe, unsure of how to approach this strange situation.

The spider turned its head towards her and waved its leg in greeting; Mary instinctively waved back but stopped mid-wave as she felt silly greeting a spider.

Mary took a deep breath to calm herself before walking over, "Dad..."

"Oh, Mary?" The man turned around, looked at his daughter, and chuckled, "Caught in the storm? Should have stayed inside with Julius and me."

"Julius?" Mary questioned while looking around, yet the pink spider waved its fluffy leg.

*'Hello, I am Julius, the mightiest blacksmith spider.'*

Mary was startled to hear a childish voice in her head and awkwardly dropped the two stone slates in her hands. She shook the spider's limb with two fingers, "Hi, I'm Mary. Are you doing that?" She asked while pointing towards the sword, slowly twirling around while suspended in the air.

The spider vigorously nodded with the front of its body in agreement and struck a victorious pose.

Mary shook her head and turned to her Father, "Dad, you are smithing again? What about..." She stopped herself; the destruction of his mana circuit was a sensitive topic.

The man warmly smiled, "Thanks to Julius here, my mana circuit has recovered!" He then pointed toward two holes on his neck, "I don't know how it works, but his bite seems to enhance my mana and strengthen me. So in return, I am making him a gift. Apparently, there is a competition between the spiders on who can get the humans to make the coolest items."

Mary gestured towards the floating sword, "So you will give a human-sized sword to a magical spider? Is that safe?"

The elderly man shrugged his shoulders, "Apparently, the spiders are the weakest. According to Julius, there is a sentient plant monster residing under Blackthorn. Also, his 'papa', who I assume is the Duke is also a Master Mage if the rumours of him having a silver cape are true." The man then looked down and noticed one of the stone slates facing straight up, "Blacksmith tutor?"

Mary followed his eyes and nodded, "The Duke claims he wishes to develop Blackthorn into an eternal city for him to rule over, although those are rumours. Unfortunately, I wasn't there when he gave the

speech. One thing I wish to confirm is the rumour of no taxes this year. That would be a true blessing, but I highly doubt it."

The elderly man went to pick up the slate, but to his surprise, it floated into his hand; he gave the pink spider an appreciative nod and inspected the contents, "An entire silver a week? Gold for each Blacksmith trained?" He then looked towards the spider, "Does teaching Julius to become a Blacksmith count, I wonder?"

Mary sneakily picked up the other slate and walked towards the doorway, leaving her Father and the friendly spider to their Blacksmith talk. Once she had returned to her bedroom, she lay on her bed and let out a deep sigh.

"Curiosity killed the cat..."

Although Mary told her Father that a big harvest was coming this year, that was a total lie. Her fields had underperformed, and she had taken out loans to pay for food.

With such dire circumstances breathing down her neck, she could finally see some hope written on the slate lying beside her. The question was if it was too good to be true.

"I will visit the Duke tomorrow and decide on my future myself."