

*There's a marked change in my notes from the horse incident and onwards. Whether it was due to the brain injury, the near-death experience, or part of my apparent soul merge, I wasn't sure. I still felt like myself and acted like myself. Well, that was the crux of it - some of my actions were slightly skewed. One half charming showman, the other ruthless combatant - the resulting mix was a boon to both sides. As if my very being had been hit with a Power Token. Max+.*

Ren sighed. "You can't torture information out of him."

I raised an eyebrow at her, unsure if she meant morally or because he couldn't speak. Probably the latter. Not that I particularly wanted to torture him and get bad information in the process. There was a part of me who wasn't sure if he had suffered enough yet.

Hadrian continued to glare at us with the impassive yellow eyes that treants were known for. He had remained remarkably still during the night, and I wondered how the System saw him now. Surely not as a Player, otherwise it would translate his speech. Had he somehow become a Monster, but with his memories intact? Not something I wanted to answer. Maybe it was just a curse that needed lifting.

I turned back to Ren and rubbed my chin. "Do elves have something like 'good cop, bad cop'?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, I'll be the bad cop." I grinned as she pouted.

"Unfair, that's kind of my thing." She made a show of possibly arguing over it, but relented with a sigh. "I'll follow your lead."

Bad cop wasn't exactly my thing either, but I was feeling off my normal game due to the cracked skull, and it might put off the tree enough to work better. I withdrew my lit torch, and we walked over.

"Morning, Hadrian. If that is still you in there. Ren here is insisting that we untie your little tree arms. Personally, I'm against that... but if you try anything, then I'll be illuminating your internal organs." I waved the torch in front of him and he winced away. "I'll even let you decide from which end."

Ren kneeled down to work on the bindings. "Best listen. He's been getting gradually more unhinged every day. He'll listen to me, okay? I won't let him hurt you if you play nice."

I watched Hadrian for any kind of reaction, but he remained impassive. If he was a Monster he'd probably attack immediately. One arm out, and kept it to himself. Wolf came and sat behind us to watch. I tilted my head over my shoulder. "Don't worry, bud, you might have your new chew toy soon."

Second arm out and he rubbed at his wooden wrists with his little claw hands, but continued to glare. Some part of him remained.

“You’re doing well,” Ren said in a hushed tone beside his head before rejoining me for the interrogation.

“Alright!” I began, louder than necessary to cut him from that comfort. “Now we’ll see how useful you are. Raise your right hand if you understand me.”

After a brief pause, he did.

“Lower it. Now left arm.” The process was repeated, and he understood me. “Right hand is for yes, left is for no. Do you understand?”

His right hand raised with hesitation.

“Just answer honestly,” Ren added, “things will be okay.”

She was selling it too well; I almost believed her. “Let’s start off easy.” I worked my jaw. “Are you still Hadrian?”

Right hand, he was still in there.

“Is this a permanent transfiguration?” Left Hand. “A curse that needs lifting?” Right Hand.

“I have an Antidote I could give him!” Ren offered, being ever so helpful.

Hadrian seemed to perk up at this, wanting to nod if his current physiology allowed it. His right clawed hand rose up eagerly.

“Hand down,” I demanded. “That wasn’t a question. Your honesty may give you lenience, but I need some questions answered first.”

An outside observer may wonder why we didn’t turn him back into a human first and get the information in its fullest form. Have an actual conversation about it. Well, a magician never revealed his secrets. We kept him desperate.

“First question. Are there any other groups of Crimson Shadows in this area?” Right hand. “There is one by the bridge over the river.” Right hand.

Ren leaned towards him. “Is that the only one left?” Right hand.

That filled enough of the gaps for me to be contented. We had killed just over a dozen of the gang. It’d be hard to imagine there were many more lurking around given how quiet the woods had been in terms of Players. One last group to prevent people gaining access to the Fields and beyond seemed reasonable.

“Are there more than five members there?” I narrowed my eyes. Right hand. “More than ten?” He paused, raising both hands slightly - unsure. It looked as though Parties were often five people. They had three scouting groups causing havoc throughout this first area. Probably a group or two would be at the bridge.

The three of us might have an issue. I wondered how they would respond if I suggested stowing a corpse on Wolf for easy Roger access. I wondered if he enjoyed his mash. Suddenly, I felt very hungry.

My eyes scanned through my Inventory as the other two waited. Just needed something to snack on really - why was so much of it raw meat? I was just about to settle for some plain bread, when I scrolled to the consumable bottles.

Into my hand, one of the vials of blood. "This pique your interest, firewood?"

He almost went to leap from his sitting position to grab for it, before a calm hand from the elf kept him seated. I rolled my tongue around in my mouth, wondering how it tasted. Probably worse than my own blood, which I wasn't too keen on.

"Addiction is a terrible thing." I swirled it side to side. It was fair to assume he probably didn't know how the Lady's ability worked, or couldn't explain the nuance of it even if he did.

"Perhaps we can cure you of this, as well?"

He shook, and his left hand went up. They seemed reliant on it, or at least desired it more than was healthy. A knife to twist.

I popped the cork, watching his panicked reaction on his wooden face. Slowly, I started to tip it until the first drop escaped and fell to the uncaring ground.

Hadrian squirmed and shook as though I had plunged the torch into him.

"Wait," Ren interrupted. "Maybe if he really helps us, then you can give that to him?"

I clucked my tongue and watched her bright blue eyes. It was hidden far below her surface expression, but there was the hint there that she was enjoying this. It was fun. "Well, it'd have to be something very helpful for me to reconsider." I didn't tip any more, but I held it at a threatening slant.

"You can do that right, Hadrian?" Her eyes searched his yellow orbs. "Do you know where the Lady is going?"

Despite his lust for the liquid I held with such contempt, he wavered before slowly raising his right hand.

"Somewhere in the second area, past the bridge?" Right Hand. "The Mills?" Left Hand. "One of the towns?" Right Hand.

I raised my eyebrow at Wolf as the elf went through all the towns in the second area. Sitting there with his little bowler hat on, he looked quite the character. I gave him an 'are you okay' nod, which he answered by rubbing his stomach with a large paw. With a grin, I acknowledged his desires. We had already had breakfast, but there was no law against a second one. Did we already eat? Things were starting to blur, and an ache spread through my head.

“Candlekeep! Perfect, thank you, Hadrian.” Ren didn’t have it in her to fake a smile, but at least her voice sounded happy to have gotten an answer.

With a slight gesture to her, I wanted to see if she had anything to ask - which she declined with the slight shake of her head.

“Alright, Hadrian. I guess you’ve earned this then.” I checked a bottle to his root-like feet.

Immediately, he dropped to the floor to scabble for it, his sharp fingers digging through the dirt. He got it in his clutches with some effort and lifted it up into the air to see that it was empty. A shadow passed over him as Wolf stomped down upon and began to tear him to pieces.

“Shame we didn’t have any Antidotes, huh?” I watched the carnage impassively.

“Oh, I did.” Ren shrugged and looked at me. “But I wasn’t about to waste something we might need.”

I nodded and then winced as a sharp pain radiated up the front of my head. My hand held it to make sure I didn’t have a trap door about to open and spill my brain matter about.

“You okay? You need to rest.” She put her arm around me and walked us away from the sound of Wolf chewing wood into shrapnel.

“Need to sit and maybe eat.” Conjured up a chair - my last one. I’d have to steal more. I sat, and she gave me a squeeze on the shoulder before moving away. My eyes held closed, I tried to will away the pain.

“No adventuring until you’re recovered. I know you’re burning up to go get maimed at the bridge, but this is the first time we’ve got the upper hand.”

She was right, on all accounts. Her chair moved across the dirt and stopped beside mine. If we had taken out most of the gang here, then they couldn’t afford to try to chase us around. They’d hold the bridge at all costs - if that was truly their plan. That put them in one place that we could assail at our leisure. When I was a little healthier.

“You’re a great good cop,” I turned my tired head to see her beside me.

“Thanks. I was impressed by your bad cop routine.” Although her eyes narrowed, there was no tension in her face. “You do the unhinged thing really well.”

“Hardly had to act at all.” I smiled and looked at the sky. Cloudy, but pleasant. I closed my eyes as Wolf padded over to lie down near us.

I felt Ren’s hand on my arm. “Hey, Max. Take a break from being full-on today, okay? Let me be in charge.”

“My life is in your hands.” Too tired to open my eyes, I tried to tune out most things. She asked the bear to collect wood, specifying that it shouldn’t be wood from Hadrian. The campfire was lit again. The sound of cutting. Pouring water. I fell asleep.

I awoke, briefly concerned, sometime later. By my own volition and not at the behest of the elf. My vision blurred as I tried to click everything back into place. Still daytime, so just a nap. There was a smell that was... divine. I leaned forward to see Ren stirring an almost cauldron-sized metal pot hanging over the fire. Wolf was lying on his side against my chair asleep, like an oversized dog.

"Sometimes it feels like I did die and went to heaven." I smiled softly at the elf as she turned to me.

"Smells good, huh? My aunt used to have a plot where she'd grow vegetables. In the colder months, we'd hunt rabbits and then make stew." Her eyes unfocused as she dug around at those memories. "Just stew, a fireplace, and warm blankets."

"Sounds like the perfect day." I furrowed my brow. "I seem to have mixed memories now. Although, only at a certain point to things diverge. Same childhood. Love for magic... also similar. Mother passing, then it gets a bit murky."

"It's kind of spooky in a way." She began ladling some stew into bowls. "Like there must be other versions of me somewhere? Ones where I didn't come here?"

I grunted. "No point worrying, you're you and this is your life and existence."

"I suppose." She walked over to hand me a bowl before sitting on the chair beside me with her own. "You wouldn't want to be a different Max, in a different time?"

My tired eyes looked at the raised spoon, and I blew the steam away and cooled it. Put the chunks of cooked vegetables in my mouth. Heavenly.

Glancing at her bright blue eyes, I shook my head with a smile. "I'm right where I want to be."