

*When cracks form in something, it is often impossible to fully repair it. Even with the right filler or adhesive, once the weakness is introduced, it can never get better. Keep ignoring the problem for too long and the crack grows, threatening the stability of whatever metaphorical object you are imagining. Yes, this is an indirect shot at my emotional openness. The greatest trick was convincing myself there was even a crack in the first place.*

I sat on the wooden chair, staring at the fire. Whatever ills had ailed me were now healed, aside from the apparent trauma. The elf had gone to find us a place to make camp, and was in the sort of mood where I didn't want to ask any questions. She was now at the right side of the fire from me, sitting up against the sleeping bear. Staring at the fire just as I was.

My tongue found around the inside of my teeth, a last idle act before I gave in and was the first to speak. I felt like it was my line, given I had taken the lead in committing to the combat. "I'm sorry for making us fight."

She tilted her head to the side and looked at me with tired eyes. "You called me your friend earlier."

I nodded briefly, some slight confusion on my face. She pat the ground beside her, and as much as my body protested the movement I stood to go sit next to her. I sank briefly into the bear, and was surprised at how comfortable he was.

"I think we are," I ventured. "We're a little above being business partners..."

We stared into the fire. The crackling light was comforting, despite the potential dangers around us. The amber light melted away at the stress that had been building up within me.

"Friends share information," she began, turning her face to me. "I'll begin. The reason I don't like dresses is because my mother would make me wear them on all the boring formal occasions. You were right though, blue *is* my color."

"Brings out your eyes."

"That's what my mother would say, too." She sighed and looked up at the night sky. "Do you know how long I was on the island?"

I shook my head. "No, you were pretty vague."

"Three months. The first month, I was a wreck. I hid away and cried for everything that I'd lost or left behind. Flynn, my parents, my sister, and the responsibilities I was bound to inherit."

That was a long time to be stuck there, compared to how long it took me to get up to level five. At some point, I was envious of all that she had compared to my... work-only lifestyle, but she probably envied me for having less heartache and loss over my past life.

"I didn't really spend too much time around other Players... until Hadrian. That was the guy on the horse."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what else to add at this juncture.

“He started off as the gallant knight type. Rugged, strong, determined and capable. After he tried to make a move on me, I told him I wasn’t looking for that. I gave him the whole story of Flynn and Lady in Red. Gave me his word he’d help me find justice.”

I nodded along. “But he didn’t.”

“No. The next night, he tried making a move again. I think out of everything, knowing that I had just lost the love of my life and still trying it on hurt me the most. I kicked him in his stupid balls and stormed away. Never saw him again.” She exhaled and deflated.

“And now he is working for the Lady, too.”

“*Fucker*. Can’t wait to tear his miserable head off and stick it up his betraying ass.” She looked over at me again. “This is one part of the reason I was so tough on you, and I’m sorry.”

“It’s understandable.” I gave her a glum smile. “I’m sorry that you were treated that way.”

Her face softened slightly, and I almost thought the scowl would disappear. The barest of frowns remained, which I took to be as close to a smile as I’d get.

“I think the point I’m leading to Max is... you can be annoying, and I’ll tolerate it. You can flirt, and I’ll tell you to fuck off. If you get us into shit, I’ll forgive you. I don’t actually expect you to be perfect or get everything right, that’s just me projecting.” She raised an eyebrow. “You don’t need to impress me, okay?”

I looked into her tired eyes as she tried to read my face for my reaction. There were words inside me somewhere, but in honesty, I was stunned. I wavered as if I might burst, before allowing my rolling inside to calm. “That honestly means a lot to me, Ren.”

From inside my jacket, I withdrew the small bouquet of blue flowers.

“Dickbag,” she snorted, taking them from me. “But, thanks. Were you keeping these for me, or for one of your tricks?”

“Fifty-fifty,” I shrugged. There was an odd feeling within me, both of being grounded, exposed, and yet so far away, as if I were watching myself from a distance.

Ren rolled her eyes. “Well, just to prove my point, I’m not going to pressure you to give me information in return.” She ran a finger around one of the closed flowers, almost as if she was trying to remember something.

I leaned back into the thick fur of the warm bear and looked up at the dark sky. There were stars. Two moons, one of which mostly hid behind the other. *Mostly* there was the heavy weight of something in my gut that was worming its way up.

“Imagine this,” I began as I closed my eyes, my heart louder than it needed to be. “A young Max, about to go on to do the most important show of his career. Some of the top critics, talent scouts, booking agents, and a full house in the largest venue I had been to yet. I had practiced for months to get it all perfect.”

I turned my head to her to see that she was listening intently, and she nodded politely for me to continue. My eyes went to the dancing flames of the camp.

“Almost a year's work in total, to get it flawless. The best tricks I had, a dazzling show - my chance to get my foot on the ladder. I was in my changing room the day of, getting prepared. An hour... maybe two before the curtains went up. Then my phone rang.”

My jaw worked, and I paused for a moment, the vivid memories I had tried to store away making themselves known.

“It was my dad. I thought he was going to wish me good luck, but... but he was crying.” I exhaled through my nose, closed my eyes, and looked down to try to keep myself in check. The sounds flooded back in, each uncharacteristic sob that he had taken twisting the knife in my heart once again, even after all these years.

A hand rested softly on my shoulder. I couldn't open my eyes to see her face. Not when I hadn't even said the line that threatened to break the dam yet. I took a deep breath.

“It was my mother... an accident.”

“I'm so sorry, Max.”

Compassion just made it worse somehow. As if it was a reminder that it was something I should be crying over. Made it real when other people accepted it... maybe because I hadn't.

Quiet tears rolled down my cheeks, my energy too spent to feign the smiling showman facade any longer. “I wanted to go see her one last time... but my dad said to do the show. My manager said to do the show. *The show must go on.*”

“And you did the show?”

I nodded, flinging the drops of age old sadness onto my lap. “Gave it my all. Did it for her, I told myself. Heart and soul... and I *aced* it. Then... I just didn't stop. Somehow, I thought I could work past it if I kept on running, kept on being a better magician.”

Ren gave my shoulder a squeeze and withdrew her hand. “My dad had a saying, ‘you can't fill a hole by building a tower over it.’ Eventually, the hole will get bigger and the tower will come crumbling down.”

“I'm feeling pretty crumbly now.” I deflated, somehow even more exhausted.

“At least you've now addressed the problem. Only you can fill that hole in, though.” She handed me a single flower back. “Thank you for sharing, Max. I know it wasn't easy.”

“And you said you weren't my therapist,” I grinned, looking over the blue petals.

“If you want to do adventuring long term, we'll need to be that for each other. It's not only about killing things and... doing better tricks.”

My body ached, and I felt like I had been fully tenderized inside and out. "I'm... thank you, Ren. I feel like I don't deserve the effort or perseverance."

She shook her head. "Don't be an ass, Max. It's not wholly selfless. I need someone I can trust to keep me sane, too. Help stop me from building towers."

"I'll try," I smiled. We fell into a tired silence, our emotions as spent as our physical bodies, and the fire became our focus again. She unclasped her boots and took them off, wiggling her toes toward the heat.

I did the same and made the mental note to find some boots that matched my outfit that I could replace my dress shoes with. The equipment I had on currently was a pair of sandals that gave Intelligence - and I was smart enough not to show them to anyone.

"You think we're safe here with the fire?" I asked, shuffling into the soft wall of bear behind me.

"No. I don't think we'll be safe anywhere." She closed her eyes and crossed her arms. "We can't live in fear, though. If we die, we die."

"Would be pretty miserable having this emotional revelation and then getting gutted in the night."

There was no response from her. I stared out amongst the darkened trees surrounding us, the lower branches illuminated by the glow of our lowering fire. The Lady already had a new gang, it seemed, and was poking at us to see how soft we were. Hadrian had found us somehow. It wouldn't have been too difficult for him to return a few hours later and come find our fire.

But did they want to? It depended on her actual goals - we might just be a bonus side quest because Hadrian was in the area at the time. Maybe Ren was right. There was no solution to sleep easily until they were dead. They had the advantage in this situation, and I hated that. I needed the control.

I looked over at the elf, who had fallen asleep. Something ached in my chest to see her face relaxed without the tension of a scowl or frown. We were both posturing outwardly non-stop, but remained fragile on the inside. Cold to the process of murdering for power in hopes we carved out a new life that fit right in this world. Would the System even allow it? If this world was constant conflict, willing to hold a knife to our throats just for existing, then we'd need to be strong to rise above it. Be above those threats.

My fingers held onto the single flower she returned to me and I placed it back in my Inventory. Dragged it to one of the grid squares where I wouldn't accidentally draw it into the world in the middle of combat. I wasn't even sure what significance it held to me yet. It just felt... symbolic of something.

Perhaps I was just too tired. We had completed the bandit Quest twice over, and a third repeat in the morning would get us to the new level. The spark of excitement lit up inside me even as our campfire waned. What new tricks would the System allow me? How powerful

would I be this time tomorrow? I tried to remind myself to temper my expectations, and not push myself to the limit so often.

A quick glance over at the elf just cemented the fact that, if anything, I needed to take this more seriously. Not to be as reckless with my health and sanity... but the limits did need to be tested. We all needed safety - even Wolf, too. Naturally, only through crashing through the greatest of dangers would we find the path to what we needed. So I needed to be strong. Unmatched.

Learning only half a lesson, I closed my eyes and let the darkness take me.