

Untitled D&D Group Story

By BreaktheBar

Chapter 1

Packing up the minis, map, dice and all of my other bits and bobs that I used for DMing was like a ritual at the end of a gaming night. I'd been doing it for two decades, adding new tools and tricks here, dropping things there when I realized I hadn't used them in months. Being a Dungeon Master for a regular group of players was probably one of the greatest pleasures I had in life.

"All good, Shane?" Melissa asked me as she came back into the dining room. She was readjusting her sweater, a pleasant glow on her face after the exciting game we'd played. Melissa's elf fighter Meliana of the Autumn Veil had gotten into a bit of trouble early on in the session with a pair of the Dark Tyrant's bodyguards, and the roleplaying that resulted had been a fun side-scene as most of the group rushed to try and save her.

"Yeah, for sure," I said with a grin. "You good? Those 'bodyguards' were pretty demanding."

Melissa laughed. "Well, it helped that you gave me a heads up that things might get *prickly* tonight. Thanks for that."

"You know me, always looking out for my players," I said.

"But never for their characters," Melissa replied with a smirk. It was a longstanding joke in the group that I wasn't afraid to kill a character if they got themselves in over their head. It didn't happen that often, especially with a group that had been playing together for twenty-three years. "Look, I've got a favour to ask," Melissa said as she came and sat down at the table.

"Sure, just ask," I said. I had to assume it had something to do with the local theatre company. She'd been the official stage manager for the group since she'd left off teaching Drama at the community college to be a stay-at-home Mom. That had been years ago, and every once in a while she tapped into our D&D group for a little extra help since we'd all come up in the Theatre program at State together.

"Rhia is just starting her summer break next month," Melissa said. "And she's got some friends together from her program and was wondering if you'd run a D&D game for them over the summer. A little four-month campaign, weekly games. She was hoping you might do more than that but I told her weekly was already more than enough to ask you."

I raised my eyebrows, stopping my packing with just a few items left on the table. “Melissa, I don’t know...”

“Not like *our* games,” Melissa assured me. “A regular game, like you used to run at the Game Store.”

“Oh,” I said, exhaling and shaking my head. “Jesus, Mel. Be a little clearer next time.”

“Sorry,” she laughed. “I should have realised the implication.”

“Well, yeah, I’d be happy to help out,” I said. “Tell Rhia to text me. She could have done that to begin with.”

“I think she was feeling a little shy about it,” Melissa chuckled. “She’s only ever played TTRPGs at home with me and Dan, but she’s loved hearing the, um, *edited* versions of our adventures since she was a kid. I think she’s got a bit of hero worship for your storytelling skills.”

“And I’m sure you’ve told her that it’s all just improv at the end of the day,” I said.

“Of course,” Melissa smirked. “But that doesn’t stop her from asking for updates to your story every time we come home from our game nights.”

I snorted, thinking of how the college coed would react to the unredacted version of events that happened around our game table. “I’m flattered,” I said. “And I’ll start thinking up something that should fit the timeline. But I’m not setting things up through you as an intermediary. She’s an adult now, she can get off her butt and organize things.”

“Agreed,” Melissa said. She stood up from her chair and came over to me, and I quickly closed my notes binder so she didn’t see what I had planned for our campaign. That made her laugh and she leaned down and hugged me, kissing my cheek. “Thanks, Shane.”

“No problem,” I said, hugging her back one-armed. “It’s Rhia, how much trouble could some college kids be?”

That made Mel snort as she stood back up. “You say that now, but remember that we started our game going into our junior year and all the shit that we got up to.”

“I’m doomed,” I laughed. “Doomed!”

Chapter 2

Rhia broke into a grin as she stepped through the doors of the coffee shop and spotted me at a back booth. I'd picked the spot because it was the perfect site for the organisational meeting of a D&D game - a board game cafe. I'd already ordered a couple of chocolate croissants and coffees since I knew how hungry college kids could be, and I was happy that Rhiannon had shown up on time.

"Hey, Snorey," I said as I stood up and opened my arms.

"Hey, Lumpy," Rhia grinned as she walked right into my hug. "I still don't snore."

"Says you," I laughed as we separated and grabbed our seats. "So, how was second year? I haven't seen you since your fall performance."

"Good," she said. "My program classes are way better than my general ones, and I get to do less of those next year *and* I'll have a better chance at good roles for the performances."

"What happened with the winter performance?" I asked, already knowing the answer from her Mom but wanting to show her my support without just coming out with it. "I didn't get an invite."

Rhia rolled her eyes and scoffed lightly. "I got shafted by politics," she said. "I was supposed to be the understudy for the second lead, but this kiss-ass bitch made a huge deal about it being her final year and how she felt slighted and one of the Profs stepped in. I ended up on Stage Crew and didn't invite anyone cause I could see the writing on the walls from the beginning. It was a shit show."

"Ah, I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sure you would have gotten the ship sailing smoothly if you'd had a bit more control."

"Well, I don't know about that," she smiled, giving me a look that said she knew I was just boosting her ego. Rhiannon had the same long, brown hair as her mother. She was tall, almost six foot, which was often detrimental to an actress since it made male stars look smaller. Rhia was also blessed with an extremely sweet, youthful face that meant if we'd been located in California she likely would have been a Disney kid if her parents had been willing to put her through that - probably a secondary character, with her height, but still an in into the business. Instead, living in Michigan, she was a diamond in the rough just waiting to be discovered when she got the opportunity.

"So, let's jump right into it," I said. "You want to play a game."

"Yes," she said, breaking into a grin as she set down the croissant she'd been munching on and pressed her hands flat to the table. "And thank you so much for agreeing to DM. Dad thought you might be too busy."

“Well, your Mother can be pretty convincing,” I said. “But how could I say no to you?”

She rolled her eyes again and shook her head. It had always been a little game since she'd been a kid, me blowing up her ego with ridiculous statements. The game had died off in her early teens as she'd been going through the harder years of puberty and needed actual encouragement, but she'd always reacted the same way to even my smallest compliments and encouragement.

“What kind of game are you looking for, and how many players?” I asked.

“Six players,” she said. “And they are all in my year or one year up in my Theatre program so we're hoping for lots of roleplaying and improv practice. And I want a game in your world, not the published ones. I've always loved the stories Mom and Dad tell, and I love the way you set up the world. I could probably name off more spots on your map than Dad can.”

“That might be true,” I laughed. “Your father is *awful* at remembering the names of places or characters. Always has been.”

Rhia chuckled and nodded. “I know. Mom always has to correct him when they tell me what happened.”

“Alright, I can definitely do a game set on Firth,” I said. “Any other requests? Has anyone else played before?”

“Tori played before back in high school,” Rhia said. “So just me and her. The others are all new, but I think Tori is going to teach her roommate Elyse the basics. And I think probably just general fantasy stuff for the most part in terms of themes - everyone knows Lord of the Rings and the basics of that so no one should feel out of their depth.”

“Sounds good,” I said. “General fantasy, my setting, six players, two with some experience. It shouldn't be too hard to get your friends up to speed. Anything I should be aware of going into this? Any of them dating, or heading in that direction?”

“Well, I mean, not to tell people's secrets, but Elyse went on a few dates with Nate and I think they banged, but that was at the beginning of the year and they seem fine to be around each other,” Rhia said. “Other than that, I think Ian has a thing for Tori, but when you see Tori you'll understand why - everyone has a thing for Tori. He just got out of a thing with another girl in our program though so I doubt he'll make a move for at least a couple of months.”

“I just don't want dating stuff to mess with the dynamics of the group,” I said. “People hooking up or breaking up can cause disruptions, and with a little under 4 months if we take a week or two off for people to cool down, that's a lot of time lost.”

“Isn’t almost *everyone* in your and my parents’ group together because of your game?” Rhia smirked at me. “Well, everyone but you, He Who Sits Behind The Screen?”

“Yes and no,” I said, shaking my head at her use of the unofficial nickname my college friends had given me. “Jack and Veronica were dating already when we started back then, and Rachel and Aaron broke up and got back together almost six times before they got married and that was a problem a few of the times.”

“What about my parents?” Rhiannon asked. “The way they tell it, their characters fell in love and then they followed suit.”

“That’s true,” I chuckled. “But don’t bet on that happening with one of these guys, missy. Your Mom and Dad had their own hurdles along the way.” What I wasn’t going to tell her was that Rhiannon had been one of those hurdles - she was immensely loved, but she’d been an ‘oops.’ Things had turned out for the best in the end, and Dan and Melissa were extremely happy together, but they hadn’t actually been dating when it happened. The pregnancy, and their in-game romance, had blossomed into their actual romance and marriage.

Rhia quickly polished off the last of her croissant and licked her thumb as she smirked at me a little. “I’m not seriously interested in any of the guys we invited to be players, Shane,” she said. “Don’t worry about me.”

“Alright, Snorey,” I chuckled. “Anything else I should know?”

“Just that I love you and you’re my favourite,” she said with a sweet little smile.

I rolled my eyes and pushed my croissant across the table to her. “Little gremlin,” I muttered.

She scrunched up her nose and picked up the pastry, taking a big bite. “Fank-oo,” she said around her full mouth.

“College students,” I replied. “Always hungry. House rule number one for the game - you guys are bringing the snacks!”

Chapter 3

I surveyed the table in my game room, double-checking that I'd remembered everything. I had my custom-printed map of my homebrew world of Firth hanging up on the wall like always. My DM screen, my notes, my dice - with extra sets ready in case someone didn't bring their own. I had the fresh, partially completed character sheets ready to go. With new players, it was always better to give them a *few* choices like basic class and names and to get into the game quickly. I had three copies of the Player's Handbook out and ready for referencing (or browsing for inspiration). Drinks were prepped on the side table - non-alcoholic since at least half of them were still 20. Bowls were ready for whatever snacks they brought.

With nothing left to do, I nodded to myself, proud of my work.

"Nothing better than Game Day," I said, looking over at my cat where he was lounging on his shelf perch near the window. "Right, Jasper?"

Jasper meowed at me and blinked.

"Good point," I said, the old game of pretending to talk to him so I wasn't talking to myself kicking in. I headed back out of my game room to my office, sitting down to check my emails. No time to spin up some work, but enough to fire off a couple of emails. I was trying to decide how best to phrase 'Pay my rate or get fucked' to a client who had come to me through word of mouth when the doorbell rang.

Leaving my office and work behind, I headed to the front door and could hear female voices on the other side. I immediately hoped that Rhia wasn't making things awkward for me and showing up *after* her friends, but I put on my winningest smile and opened the door.

Oh thank God, I thought.

"Hey, ladies," I said, swinging the door open wide and gesturing for them to come in. "Come on in!"

"Hey, Shane," Rhia set, leading the way with a big grin and stepping right up to me to pull me into a tight hug. Her dark chestnut hair was down and loose, looking silky smooth, and she'd done her makeup lightly. I was a little shocked by her outfit though - the pink skirt was fine, but the polka dot red and white top looked like it was a size too small for her. Especially in the bust. It showed off a strip of her stomach above the waist of her skirt and between the sheer amount of cleavage she was showing and the thin shoulder straps I was pretty damn sure there wasn't a bra under it.

"Hey, Rhia," I said, hugging her back one-armed, deciding to just try and accept the fact that she was a college coed and this was probably normal for her.

“Shane,” she said, stepping aside but keeping her arm around my waist from her hug, “This is Tori, and this is Elyse.”

“Nice to meet you, Shane,” Tori said, leading the way in. Rhia had mentioned that ‘everyone has a thing for Tori’ and I could see why - she was stunning in the sort of open way that I’d only ever really seen in true actresses. Tori was clearly of Indian or Pakistani descent, her warm skin tone and dark hair distinctive when combined with her delicate features. She’d worn a green summer dress that showed off almost as much cleavage as Rhia’s top, and while she wasn’t *quite* as well-endowed she certainly wasn’t lacking anything in that department.

“You too,” I said, accepting her hand and shaking it.

“Hi!” Elyse said, following her in. If Rhia and Tori were both typical in their ‘Theatre Girl’ attractiveness, Elyse leaned into the other side of things - she was the slightly grunge, slightly hippy, dirty-hot tomboy artist type. That was a pretty specific ‘type,’ really, but I immediately knew that Elyse was someone who liked working on the Crew in some capacity or another and wasn’t really interested in being on stage or in front of the camera. She was blonde, her hair long but with an undercut that gave her a punky vibe, further supported by a copper septum piercing that helped highlight her cheekbones and smile. She may not have been ‘actress’ pretty but she gave big ‘girl who does motocross because she can actually race’ vibes and that had a sort of attractiveness all its own. She’d arrived wearing a simple grey crop top that sat fairly high on her, making it clear she was the smallest in the bust department by far between the three of them, and a pair of jean shorts that sat loosely on her hips.

The girls got inside and kicked off their shoes, carrying their knapsacks with them, and I led them over into the game room where they gave appropriate ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ over the nerdy shrine I had created, along with some cooing as the new girls met Jasper. He was, as usual, a big slut for some pets and showed off his tummy for scritchings as he stretched out on his perch in the sun.

“So, how late are we expecting these guys to show up?” I asked. The girls had been a couple of minutes early, but we were already getting to the start time.

Rhia shot me a look, making a pained face. “So... bad news,” she said. “The guys sort of bailed over the last few days.”

“Ian’s parents wouldn’t pay for him to stay over the summer and find a job here and made him go home to work at their company,” Tori said. “So he has a good reason, at least.”

I rolled my eyes. “What are the *not* good reasons?”

“Nate and Isaac both bitched out when they found out we wanted to dress up to play,” Elyse said. “Like, cosplay our characters to get into the game more.”

“We’ve been planning this for weeks and they just told us yesterday they aren’t ‘into it like that,’” Tori said, mimicking a Bro Voice.

“Is that OK?” Rhia asked. “We can still play with just three of us, right?”

“I wish you’d told me sooner, but yeah,” I said.

“Sorry,” Rhia said with a little apologetic smirk.

“But we *are* still good to play, yeah?” Tori asked. “I haven’t played in a couple of years and Rhia says you’re supposed to be *amazing* at DMing.”

“Years of experience is what I have,” I said. “Practice makes perfect. Alright, three people is easier to manage than six. Why don’t you ladies grab some drinks there and then grab a seat and we can talk about character creation.”

“Actually,” Elyse said. “Rhia and Tori already did character creation with me at our place so we could get our costumes ready.”

I looked back over to Rhia again, who had the good decency to blush.

“Guess I should have told you about that, too,” she said.

I sighed, shaking my head at her. “Alright, let’s see your character sheets,” I said. “And you gals can go change into your costumes. Theatre kids, always so dramatic!”

“Thanks, Shane,” Rhia said.

All three of the girls opened up their backpacks and pulled out the gear they’d brought for playing, handing over their folders with their character sheets. Rhia and Tori had both brought dice with them, along with their own pencils and notebooks, and Rhia passed over a set of dice to Elyse as well.

“Downstairs bathroom?” Rhia asked me.

“You can use my office, too,” I nodded, already opening up the first sheet to check out what the girls had come up with.

As they left the room, their bare feet padding on the hardwood in the hall, I heard one of them say quietly, “You didn’t tell us your uncle was *hot*.”

“He’s not my *uncle* uncle. He’s like a family friend uncle.”

“Still, you could have warned us!”

Chapter 4

I had managed to get over my own chagrin by the time I heard the girls coming back down the hallway outside of my game room. I wasn't sure which of them, between Tori and Elyse, had made the comment but either way it was flattering to know my efforts to keep myself up paid off to the point a college coed thought I was 'hot.'

Still, I was sure that once I was more of a regular facet in their weekly routines, the 'new' factor would wear off and I'd just be their friendly weekly Dungeon Master.

"Ready for our entrances, Shane?" Rhia called from the hallways, still out of view.

I chuckled and shook my head. "Should I announce you in?"

"Sure!"

I shook my head, grinning a little, and picked up the first character sheet. Thankfully they had all limited themselves to First Level characters and based on my math had used the standard array rather than rolling. I'd used all sorts of different Stat Generation methods over the years, and all sorts of game systems in general, but with the modern system I found the standard array was best for introing new players.

"Hailing from the city at the centre of the world," I said in a deep announcer voice.

"Knight-Paladin and overall do-gooder, Olivia of Parnasus!"

Both of the other girls in the hall made fake crowd cheering noises and started clapping as Rhia came in through the door with a big smile on her face. I'd been expecting some basic costume accessories and props, but apparently, they'd gone for full costume changes. Rhia, or 'Olivia of Parnasus,' was wearing a skirt that went down a little past her knees and had soda can tabs sewn onto it in a chainmail pattern, and strappy leather sandals on her feet. Her top had been replaced by a grey leather corset that did *dangerous* things to her waist and cleavage, and it looked like she'd sewn a gorget out of a silver-coloured cloth that hugged her neck and upper chest. She was wearing an iron band on her forehead, keeping her hair out of her face, and had on the leather vambraces I'd bought her when she'd come along to the Ren Faire with me and her parents and our D&D group when she was a high school senior.

"What do you think?" She asked, spinning as she walked around the table.

"Holy crap, Rhia," I said. "You went all out!"

"I think I'm going to try to use some cosplay YouTube videos to make a proper breastplate, but I ran out of time with finals," she said, adjusting her corset as she looked down at it. I had to gulp a little - I knew she was chesty like her mother, but I'd never been quite so *presented* with that fact before that day.

“Sounds cool,” I said. “But, uh, how about I get a towel for you to sit on?”

“Why?” she asked, looking at me with a confused expression.

“Wooden chair seats and metal links, even aluminium, don’t mix well,” I said as I stood up and went to one of the cupboards underneath the display shelves that were interspersed around the room and displaying off my nerdy collectables. I pulled out a towel and shut the cupboard again, handing it across the table to her.

“Shit, I didn’t think of that,” she said. “Sorry.”

“It’s OK,” I said. “The skirt *looks* great. Very cool.”

“Thanks,” she said with a smile, setting the folded towel on her chair and then sitting on it. Then she made a face. “Why do you keep towels in here?”

“In case of drink spills,” I said, not entirely lying but not telling the entire truth either. Towels were useful for absorbing a lot more than drinks, and providing soft padding for more than a butt.

“Always prepared,” she said with a little smirk. “OK, who’s next?”

I sat back down behind my DM screen and picked up the next character sheet, then cleared my voice auspiciously. “Hailing from the Shadowlands of Renn, the charming and mysterious Renee de l’Ombres!”

Elyse came around the corner, affecting serene and aloof expression. She’d tied her hair up in a bun at the back of her head, exposing the shaved sides, and either she or one of the others had painted fake arcane-looking tattoos on her scalp and down the back of her neck in deep purple. She was wearing what looked like a modified silk bathrobe. It was black and hung down to her ankles, cinched at the waist with a bright white cord to offset the dark. She’d cut off the arms though and was wearing long-sleeved, fingerless mesh gloves that had a shimmery quality to the mesh. She’d also put on several pieces of ridiculous fantasy-style costume jewellery including a couple of taloned full-finger rings on one hand, a double-finger ring on the other hand, and a silver chain dangling from her septum piercing and connecting to her left earlobe. The final piece of the costume was a pair of costume elf ears, turning her into her half-elf persona.

I clapped along with Rhia, and Tori out in the hall.

“Fantastic,” I said.

Elyse broke her aloof expression and grinned naturally. “Thanks! I wasn’t sure if I wanted to wear a robe or a dress, but when I found this at the thrift store I knew it was perfect as a base to

start from.” She headed to her seat and sat down, wiggling her beringed fingers and tapping the two taloned ones on her character sheet as I handed it back to her. “I think I might try doing some embroidery on it next to spice it up.”

“You mean you’ll try and get Alex to do it for you,” Rhia smirked at her friend.

“*Teach* me,” Elyse laughed.

“Alex is a girl a year below us who is super into costume design. She’s got some awesome skills,” Rhia explained for me.

“Well, we’ve got spots open so if she’s interested you can invite her,” I said.

“*God*, no,” Rhia and Elyse both said at the same time, echoed by a laugh from Tori in the hall.

“Alex is great in *small* doses,” Elyse said.

‘Got it,’ I chuckled. “Alright, ready for our third reveal?”

Both of them smiled and nodded, so I cleared my voice again and affected the announcer's voice once more. “Hailing from the nomadic tribes of the East Plains, daughter of the expansive Highkick family and student of the deadly Foot Flurry Wuju-style, Jade Highkick!”

Tori entered and I wasn’t sure what I’d been expecting, but it wasn’t the quality of ears she had. The most prominent part of her whole costume were *definitely* the ears though. Big, floppy rabbit ears, held on but what I had to guess was a sturdy headband hidden by her wavy black hair. The furry fabric on the ears was almost the same colour as her warm, brown skin tone and made it immediately apparent that she was playing a Hare-person, a species that had been officially added to the game system not long ago.

The rest of Tori’s outfit suited her decision to plan a Monk - her dress was gone and replaced by what looked like a leather tube top that was compressing her breasts a bit. It left her upper chest bare, showing off the necklace of big, chunky wooden prayer beads that were double-looped around her neck. Her lower abdomen was bare, showing off a smooth stomach, and she was wearing a pair of what I felt might have been impossibly baggy parachute pants in the same dark colour as the leather top and yet somehow looked pretty comfortable. To finish off the look she’d tied tensor bandages around her wrists and ankles like she was getting ready for a kickboxing fight or something.

Tori came in with a grin and then struck a kung-fu pose, closing one eye and pursing her lips as she wove her hands gracefully in the air, transitioning to a second pose and making a ‘come at me’ gesture with one hand before breaking into laughter.

Rhia, Elyse and I had all been clapping for her, and she took a bow before grabbing her seat with a big grin on her face.

“Wow,” I said. “You all look fantastic. Definitely the *best* costumes I’ve ever had show up at a table in over twenty years of running games.”

“We wanted to get into our characters as fast as possible,” Tori said with a grin as she accepted her character sheet back from me.

“Well, it’s definitely working for me,” I said. “As long as you ladies aren’t distracted by the costumes, I think it’s great.”

“Was everything good with our characters?” Rhia asked.

“Everything checked out,” I said. “Definitely some interesting choices, and I saw that Rhia gave you ladies some ideas for backstories based on my world.”

“She’s been telling us all about it,” Elyse said. “It’s pretty much all she’s talked about for like three weeks.”

Rhia stuck her tongue out at her friend, making us all chuckle.

“I also noticed someone put a *secret* on their sheet,” I said, looking at each of them in turn. That got their eyes widening as they glanced at each other. “But, no spoilers. I definitely liked the idea though and approve of it.”

That had all three of them on the edge of their seats already, which was exactly where I wanted them.

“So, does anyone have any questions before we get started? No? OK. Let’s get adventuring...”

Chapter 5

(This chapter includes some more detailed combat stuff; the whole story won't be like this since it's a little slow-moving, it's just setting the scene for how the game works.)

"The villages of western Norhassel are in trouble," I said, putting on my DMing monologue voice. "The war against the Dark Tyrant has been raging for eight gruelling years in the east, and the attention of the realm's kings, dukes and knights have been turned towards that cause for long enough that the west, once a peaceful and bounteous region of resources worked by the smallfolk, has slowly slipped into shambles. Patrols of the King's Men no longer watch the roads. Generations of adventurous young men have been recruited from their homes into the army. Some will return, hopefully, at the end of the war - that has always been the hope. But as the years wore on, and bandits stalked the highways, and rumours of monsters spotted in the deep woods spread from village to village, life has become worn down. This is the land through which you are travelling."

I pulled out a map of the region that I had designed - it was a rough drawing, like something they would have gotten scrawled on a parchment by an innkeeper and not a fancy map from a cartographer. "You have been travelling the King's Way, here, towards the village of Tremulous Crook, bearing a message for the Headswoman who manages the affairs of Duke Unger, whose land this is. You have, however, come upon one of the many problems that plague travellers these days."

I looked at Rhia. "Olivia of Parnasus," I said. "You were thirsty and turned to grab your waterskin from the side of your pack, and that brief moment is what saved your life as the crossbow bolt tugs at your hair, passing right through the space your face was in a moment before, and thunking into your pack. What do you do?"

Rhia blinked, and then shook her head as she tried to get into character with the Hot Start I had planned. "Bandits!" she said, affecting a slight British accent that was pretty common for people starting out in fantasy roleplaying. Then she mimed drawing a sword and looked at the others. "Watch your butts, ladies!"

That got a couple of chuckles and snorts from the others, and I called for them to roll initiative to set their turn order. Elyse had gotten a quick primer from Tori, but I still coached her so she knew what I was asking of her. Once I had the turn order sorted, I turned to Tori.

"As soon as you heard the thunk of the crossbow bolt burying into Olivia's pack, Jade, your lightning-fast reflexes kicked in. You can see two men stepping out onto the road ahead of you, each of them wielding woodsman axes menacingly, and a quick glance behind you shows a woman armed with a large knife doing the same. What would you like to do?"

Tori worked her jaw for a second and I could tell she was making that last-minute decision what her character would sound like. “Can I see where the varmint with the crossbow is?” she asked, affecting a southern drawl.

I had her roll a Perception check, but she rolled low.

“No dice,” I said. “They shot from somewhere in the trees around you and you can’t see them.”

“Alright,” Tori said. “Then I leap forward, rushing towards the two men ahead of us and yell, ‘One be’ind, and a coward in the bushes!’ Can I reach the two men?”

“Absolutely,” I said.

“Awesome. I want to jump the last few feet and use my Wuju-style to dropkick the first one right in the fucking face!” Tori grinned. Hearing those words, out of her, in the accent she was using was a bit of a trip.

“First we need to know what you look like when you do it,” I said. “I assume all your characters are dressed about how you gals are, but Jade is the first Harefolk player character that’s ever shown up in Firth, so you get to tell me how Rabbity or Persony they are. Are we talking humans with ears, or like Peter Rabbit where you’re almost all rabbit and just wear some clothes?”

“Oh, I’m definitely, like, Lola Bunny ratio,” Tori said. “Big hare feet, powerful humanoid legs and torso, but covered in light fur. Boobs are obvious under my leather top. But my head is mostly cute rabbit girl, and big floppy ears like I’m wearing.”

“You’re such a furry,” Rhia teased her.

“Am not!” Tori laughed. “You can’t tell me Lola Bunny in the original Space Jam didn’t open up some bisexual curiosity.”

“I’m not saying she didn’t,” Rhia smirked. “But you came up with those fancy, high-quality ears *pretty fast*.”

Tori did blush then. “Well, my older brother *is* kind of a furry,” she said. “When I came up with the idea, I asked him about getting them, and he had like... contacts. I’m honestly a little worried about how fast he got me exactly what I was looking for.”

“Alright,” I said. “So you run up faster than either of the men expect and you leap up with your big, powerful feet into a drop kick. If we were seeing this in a comic book, it’s a shot of you flying through the last few feet in the air, about to kick this bandit’s teeth in. ‘Jade Highkick’ is splashed across the page. Tell us what her nickname is, and then make your attack roll.”

“Ooh,” Tori said, and then clucked her tongue rapidly as she quickly thought of it. “Jade’s nickname is definitely ‘Stonefoot’ because of how hard she kicks.”

“Doesn’t that sound like she’s slow, though?” Elyse asked.

“Damn, yeah,” Tori said. “OK. Her nickname is ‘Steel-toe’ because she kicks like she’s wearing steel-toe boots.”

“Awesome,” I said, writing it down in my notes.

Tori rolled her dice and quickly checked her sheet. “My unarmed strike is an eighteen.”

“Nice!” I said. “As you fly at the bandit you can see he’s grimy, and has probably spent weeks out here in the wilds, but he’s wearing a fairly nice and clean leather jerkin - other than the patched stab wound and stain of blood on it. Roll damage.”

Tori rolled again and did the math quickly. “Six points of damage.”

“Are you trying to kill him, or just knock him out?” I asked.

Tori blew out a breath, glancing at the others.

“You’re already flying through the air and kicking him in the face, you can’t ask your friends right now,” I said.

“Fuck it,” Tori said. “He’s obviously wearing looted kit. I’m not pulling my punches. Or kicks.”

“Alright,” you said. “Our comic moves on and we see the impact of both of Jade’s feet as they hit the bandit in the chest and face, snapping his head back and sending him falling backwards. He is *at least* out of the current fight.”

“Yes!” Tori said with a grin.

“Renee, you’re up next,” I said, turning my attention to Elyse. “Your half-elf reflexes aren’t quite as fast as Jade’s, but you are already moving as your friend Olivia shouts her warning.”

“There’s a lady bandit behind us, right?” Elysa asked.

“There is. She’s holding a large hunting knife of some sort and is stalking towards you.”

“Alright, I turn to her and say, ‘Fight from the shadows, die by the shadows!’ and I want to blast her with a spell,” Elyse said. She didn’t put on a voice for her character, but that was more than fine.

“Cool,” I said. “Which spell on your list would you like to use? Remember you have the ‘Free’ level ones that you can cast over and over, and you have the limited First Level spells that you can only use a couple of times a day right now.”

“Um...” Elyse said. “If I’m blasting her, I guess ‘Fiery Bolt’ makes sense.”

“Sounds good. She’s still about ten feet away from you. What’s it look like when you start casting magic?”

Elyse smirked a little. “I think it’s like the classic ‘wind that no one else can feel’ thing where her robe and hair start to blow around a little, and the tattoos on her head and neck start to glow a purple colour. And her eyes do that too!”

“Very spooky!” I said. “So that all starts to happen as you reach out and touch the weave of magic that’s in all things, drawing upon your powers. In the comic book ‘Renee de l’Ombre’ splashes on the page. What’s her tagline, and then roll your d20 and add your spell attack number to it at the top of your character sheet?”

“Oh, that’s easy,” Elyse said. “Under her name is ‘Princess of Shadows.’ And I rolled.... A seven to hit.”

“Ah, bad luck even with a cool name,” I said. “What does your fiery bolt look like?”

“Can it be more like... a black fire? Like a shadowy bolt since that’s what my magic is?”

“Sure!” I said. “You gather your power and release your shadowy bolt at the woman stalking towards you, but she’s got her eyes focused on you and sees the attack coming. She has to dive out of the way, but your magic skips off further down the road before *splating* against a tree and leaving a scorch mark. She definitely looks a little worried that they’ve decided to ambush someone who can do *that* though.”

Elyse grinned, scrunching up her nose cutely as I softened the miss a little, and nodded.

“Next up are the bandits,” I said. “The man still in front of you guys reacts to Jade rushing forward and he’s going to let out a wordless shout of anger and charge at her with his axe held high. What’s your AC, Jade?”

Tori checked her sheet. “Fifteen right now.”

“OK,” I said, rolling behind my DM screen and doing the quick math. “He comes in and tries to swing at you, but you’re too fast. How do you dodge him?”

“Well, I drop-kicked that last guy so I guess I’m on the ground where I landed,” Tori said. “So can I roll out of the way and then kip up like a badass?”

“Sure,” I said. “The dropkick was cool, and usually you wouldn’t actually be prone after your attack, so you roll sideways, the axe *chunking* into the dirt of the road just beside you, and you do a fast kip up and are back in your fighting stance. Meanwhile, the woman bandit decides if she’s going to fight someone with magic, she better do it fast - she charges in at you with her big knife, Renee. What’s your AC?”

Rhia, sitting next to her, helped her find it on her sheet. “Twelve,” Elyse said. “Worse than Tori’s - I mean Jade’s.”

“That’s true, but I still have to try to roll to hit you,” I said. I rolled the dice and internally winced - I never liked beating up on a new player and she’d already missed her first attack. But, maybe I could help her do something else cool. “The woman comes in, darting quicker than you would have expected, and stabs the point of her big knife towards your guts. She’s so fast you don’t have time to dodge out of the way, but you do have time to do something by muscle memory. You can either take the hit, or I saw earlier that you have the Shield spell on your list. If you cast that, you’ll block it.”

“Mmm,” Elyse said, furrowing her brow in concentration as she studied her character sheet and spell list. “That means I’ll only have one of my powerful spells left for the day, right?”

“Just a day in game, not *today*,” Rhia said. “If we get a chance to rest, you’ll get your spells back.”

“Oh,” Elysa said. “I get it. OK, yeah, I mean I’d rather not get stabbed in the stomach! I’ll use Shield.”

“Cool,” I said. “So you summon a pane shadow force with a quick flare of your magic and a snap of your hands and wrists. The knife hits it like it’s a brick wall and there’s a weird scratching, tearing noise as it’s deflected and the woman finds herself eye-to-eye with your glowing purple orbs. Want to say anything to her?”

Elyse stilled her face, resuming that stoic one she’d had on when she first came into the room. “Welcome to the party,” she said dramatically. “Wait! No, I’ve got a better one. ‘Shades to meet you.’”

Tori and Rhia both snorted and started laughing.

“OK, I need to work on my shadow pun one-liners,” Elyse chuckled.

“Well, you’ve definitely made an impact on this female bandit,” I grinned. “Let’s see - OK. Next up is Olivia, and then the mysterious Crossbowman.”

Chapter 6

“Well, I guess I should try and find whoever wanted to turn my face into a pincushion,” Rhia said. “Can I tell what direction I got shot at from?”

“Give me a perception check,” I said.

She rolled, winced at the number, and then checked her character sheet. “Seven,” she said.

“Not enough, sorry,” I said. “You aren’t sure which side of the road it came from, and there are trees all around you.”

“OK,” Rhia said. “Um, then I guess I’m going to try and help Renee with the knife-lady so we can get into cover. I’ll jump and try to tackle the bandit to the ground as I yell, ‘Get to cover, Renee!’”

“Cool. That’s a sort of grapple check, so it’ll be an opposed roll.” We both rolled and I checked the numbers. “Looks like you’re successful,” I said. “So we see Oliva of Parnasus leap to save her friend, barreling heroically into the bandit lady, when her name splashes across the comic panel. What’s your tagline?”

“Party Paladin,” Rhia said with a smirk.

I snorted and the girls chuckled. “OK. I probably should have asked this already, but what deity does your Order of Knights serve?”

“So, as far as I know, you haven’t had this one show up in your world yet,” Rhia said. “But I was thinking Revelry if that’s OK? She would be, like, the patron of Festivals and Parties and Celebrations.”

“Hmmm,” I nodded, thinking. The deities in my world of Firth were all based on Emotions. The core three, Joy, Sorrow and Anger, created all life and filled it with their children, which were more nuanced emotions. My players had explored all sorts of different minor deities over the years - Glee, Guilt, Rage, Grief, Melancholy, Lust. I’d definitely never had a Revelry though. “OK,” I said, deciding to lean into Yes, And. “So Olivia of Parnasus, Party Paladin of Revelry. Are you the defender of the Keg Stand?”

Rhia smirked and rolled her eyes. “No one does keg stands anymore, Shane,” she said.

“We stick vodka-soaked tampons up our butts. Gets us drunk way faster,” Elyse said.

They all started laughing at the look on my face.

“I’m joking!” Elyse guffawed.

“Good God,” I said, wiping a hand over my forehead. “You had me with that one.”

“Technically it *would* work,” Tori said. “None of us are that crazy though.”

“I heard that Rachel tried it once, and got her boyfriend to do it too,” Elyse said.

“Well, she’s pretty much an alcoholic,” Rhia said. “Did you hear that-”

“*Anyways*,” I said, cutting the drama talk. “We see Olivia’s name flash across the comic panel, and then she and the bandit woman crash to the ground. Anything else you want to do?”

“Can I stab her with my sword?” Rhia asked.

“Tackling her definitely took up your action. Got a bonus action?”

“Not at this level,” Rhia shook her head. “I’m done.”

“Alright,” I said. “Then you all hear a *thwack* from the right side of the road, the same *thwack* that happened right before the bolt hit Olivia’s back.” I rolled a die behind the screen. “It looks like the hidden bandit shot at Jade, and...” I rolled the hit. “Ooh, that’s a seventeen to hit.”

“Agh,” Tori said, scrunching up her nose. “Got me.”

“The bolt thuds into the back of your thigh painfully and you take... five points of damage.”

“Fuck!” Tori exclaimed, dramatically wincing again as if she’d gotten hit.

“Hah, you get shot in the butt,” Rhia snickered.

“It was my thigh, not my butt,” Tori said.

“Won’t stop us from *saying* it was your butt when you can’t sit down,” Elyse smirked.

“Can I side with the bandits?” Tori asked me.

“Might be a little late for that after you dropkicked one to death,” I pointed out.

“OK,” Tori sighed. “It’s my turn, right?”

We’d reached the end of the turn order and were starting a new round, so I told her to go ahead. Jade, limping but trying to hide her pain, tried to fight back against the bandit attacking her with the axe but apparently, her dice didn’t like the idea of her going to fisticuffs and she rolled low. Renee was next, however, and seeing that Jade was in trouble she followed Olivia’s orders and

rushed into the brush on the left side of the road into cover from the crossbow shots, but put her back to a tree and summoned another fiery shadow bolt.

"I've got you, Jade!" Renee called, releasing the bolt at the axe-swinging bandit and catching him squarely in the back. The bolt chewed through his leather coat like a hot knife through butter and sent him spinning to the ground and smoking.

"Thanks, babe!" Jade called back.

Meanwhile, the knife-wielding lady bandit was scrambling on the ground with Olivia and tried to shank the Paladin but couldn't manage to get through her chainmail. That gave Olivia the chance to get her sword around and plunge it into the woman's side, even rolling at disadvantage and needing to take the lower of two rolls since she was trying to use a sword while lying on the ground. Olivia thought about shoving the body off of her and standing up but realized she would still be stuck in the middle of the road so instead she grabbed the body and rolled slightly to put it between her and the crossbowman.

With all of the close-up bandits dead, that brought the turn order back to the crossbow. I rolled dice behind the screen as the girls all sat on edge, worried about who was going to get shot at next. Olivia and Renee had some cover, but Jade was standing in the open still and had already been shot once. Another one could be deadly.

"As the struggles of the dying diminish, the quiet of the forest descends on the King's Way," I said. "Jade, what would you like to do?"

"No one got shot?" Tori asked in confusion.

"Not that you can tell," I said.

"Well, I guess I dive for the trees on the right side of the road and I'll take cover from the deeper part of the forest," she said.

I asked for perception rolls from all of them, and they all rolled mediocre. "After about half a minute, nothing has happened," I said.

The girls, frustrated, took some time to try and hunt down the crossbow shooter, and after a good Survival roll from Jade, they found the spot where the person was probably shooting from. Other than a single footprint that was leading away into the forest they didn't find any other sign of them.

"He ran away!?" Rhia exclaimed.

"Well, I mean, we killed three of his friends in, what, twelve seconds in-game?" Elyse asked. "That's how long two rounds is, right?"

“About that,” I nodded.

The girls, especially Rhia, were still suspicious but decided there was no point in trying to run down a fleeing bandit who had a head start on them. Especially when Jade needed some healing.

The good news was that Olivia, as a Paladin, was able to call upon her deity to do a small amount of healing. “Alright,” she said, rubbing her hands together. “Hands and knees, Jade. I gotta put my hands on that booty if I’m going to heal it.”

“What?” Tori laughed. “Oh, *lay on hands*. Your ability. Right. But it’s not my butt, it’s just my thigh!”

They bickered a little, making me laugh as all three of the girls were falling into their characters, and in the end, Tori got up and walked around the table to mime how she refused to get down on her hands and knees, but only bent over *slightly*. Rhia rubbed her hands together again like she was warming them up, then pretended to spit on them before giving Tori a smack on the back of her thigh over her pants. The Indian girl jumped slightly, turning as she laughed and slapped Rhia’s hand away.

“Alright,” I chuckled at their antics. “With the bolt pulled from Tori’s *thigh* and the wound magically healed, the three of you are able to continue your walk to Tremulous Crook. Based on the last waystone you passed, you think you’re about an hour away.”

“Well, let’s get moving then,” Elyse said. “This is fun!”

“Wait, there’s one last thing we need to do here,” Rhia said.

“What’s that?” Elyse asked.

Tori smirked and looked at me. “We loot the bodies!”

I nodded, grinning, knowing that had been coming. “There’s not much on them - they don’t seem like they were particularly successful bandits so far. Between the three of them, you find seven copper coins, two tattered leather jerkins, three sets of worn boots, two hatchets, plus three hunting knives. You do, however, also find that they are each wearing a tin amulet hung on a string around their necks. The soft metal is in a circular shape, and pressed into it is the vague shape of a hound baying at the moon.”

“It must be, like, a bandit club or something,” Tori said, speaking as Jade.

“Or a whole gang, like in Westerns,” Elyse said.

I smiled to myself and scribbled a note in my notebook. *The Risen Wolf Gang*.

Chapter 7

The adventuring trio made it to the village without any more problems, but as the King's Way led out of the forest they passed by a ring of farmsteads that looked like they had seen better days. Some were occupied, but the people working them didn't call out greetings, only stopping what they were doing and staring at them until they had walked down the road. Others were clearly abandoned, the elements slowly wearing on the properties, even though they seemed to be in prime agricultural areas.

The village of Tremulous Crook was a collection of about three dozen homes and another dozen buildings that included minor trade shops and businesses, a small Inn, a granary and the Town Hall. The girls headed straight for the Town Hall, wanting to deliver their letter to the Headswoman there, who ended up being a friendly but tired woman in her late forties. They got a bit more of a rundown of the state of things - the Headswoman, Pelli Mason, was a widow whose three sons had all gone off to the war more than five years ago, having expected that they would return well before then. The town was struggling to meet the Duke's Tax, and she broke down a little when she read the letter the girls had delivered and found out that the King had levied an additional War Tax on the entire realm to help combat the vermin tides of the Dark Tyrant.

The girls spent time trying to comfort her, and she invited them to stay in her home rather than at the Inn - it was the most profitable business in town, so they couldn't shut it down, but the ne'er-do-wells who had been frequenting it recently were suspected to be the same men and women who were causing problems all over the countryside.

Of course, the girls immediately wanted to confront the first batch of miscreants they could find, but Pelli convinced them that doing so in town would only bring their anger down on the people of the town. If anything was to be done, it had to be outside of town and with a proper Writ of Law allowing them to act as Sheriffs of the Duchy.

That information, of course, led the girls to ask the obvious question.

"Well, how can we do that?"

I'd been DMing for a long time. I was still constantly surprised but what my players would do or say in any given situation, but I knew how to lay down tempting clues for the players to pick up.

"Well, our last Sheriff and his two deputies were conscripted by the Duke two years ago," Pelli said. "As Headswoman, I have the ability to name a new interim Sheriff, but only if the Village Elders agree on who it is. No one has *wanted* the job since then other than a few strangers that we haven't really trusted, so no one can agree or not. We might be able to convince them, though. We can't send you against the bandits without the title and the writ, but there's nothing that says you can't help us out with a different problem."

“That’s perfect,” Olivia said. “We’ll take care of this other problem, and then we’ll throw a celebration party and invite all the locals in the village.”

“Well, hold on,” Jade said. “What *is* this other problem? Let’s not get ahead of ourselves and leap in without lookin’.”

Pelli told them that there had been strange things happening with the wolves out on the hinterlands to the west, closer to the mountains. There had always been wolves, and every year someone had a story about losing a couple of sheep, or a goat, or even a cow - but this year it wasn’t just one or two. Dozens of sheep from a single flock would get savaged in the night, their bodies dragged into the forests instead of eaten where they were killed. Three cows had been killed on one farm in a single night. Even several wolfhounds and sheepdogs had been killed. Farms, the ones that weren’t bound to fall into financial ruin from the losses, were being abandoned as farmers moved their livestock closer to town, but the wolves seemed to be following their source of food.

And, worst of all, three farmhands and two shepherds had gone missing in the last week. Rumours were going around that a *thing* had been sighted in the forest, with big golden eyes staring out and watching the farmers from the dark of the tree line. They claimed it was as big as a bull, but could move as fast as lightning and would disappear as soon as someone saw it and looked away.

“Alright, well, wolves we can take care of,” Jade said. “I don’t know about ‘big as a bull, fast as lightning’ monsters though.”

“Oh, that’s just a rumour,” Oliva assured her. “It’s probably just some sort of alpha wolf and is bigger than the rest, and has a taste for human flesh and isn’t scared of people.”

“Because that sounds *so much better*,” Renee said, rolling her eyes.

“We’ll hunt down the wolves, Headswoman,” Olivia promised. “Count on us.”

The girls then roleplayed through staying the night at Pelli’s, a few more cracks getting made at Jade’s expense about getting shot in the butt. Then, the next morning, they were ready to set out for the hills to the west.

I described the town a bit more as it was waking up for the morning, dropping hints about the various businesses they might make use of in the coming weeks depending on how the campaign went. I had just finished describing a particularly large apple tree that stood beside the Town Hall when I was interrupted by Rhia.

“Wait!” she said, slapping her hands down on the table in excitement. “Is that a Chun-Shi Tree?”

I was a little surprised that Rhia’s knowledge of Firth went back that far. “Actually, it is,” I said.

“OK, I grab Renee and Jade by the hands and I say, ‘Follow me, this is important,’ and drag them over to the tree,” Rhia said.

“Um, what’s so special about this tree?” Jade asked as Tori put her southern accent back on.

“Yeah, aren’t we trying to get out to the wolfy areas before it gets dark?” Renee asked.

“This is a Chun-Shi tree,” Olivia said. “Legend says that Chun-Shi was a warrior who revered all life, and he and his compatriots battled Terror when a cult tried to summon the god in the flesh. At the end of the battle he gave up his enchanted quarterstaff that had pierced the living god’s body, and his ally Isil the White Witch turned it into an enormous tree that would lock the god’s form away for as long as the tree lived on. When Chun-Shi learned of the curse’s condition, he dedicated the rest of his life to taking clippings from the tree and planting far and wide across the land. This tree is over four hundred years old, and some say you can commune with a Chun-Shi Tree to learn what it knows.”

It was a pretty good retelling of the end of the very first campaign I’d run for Dan and Melissa and our crew from college. Maybe a little more flowery than the initial way my players had worded things, but definitely a worthy legend and honestly a little touching to hear it told that way. I managed to keep the heart-warming nostalgia feelings for that campaign inside, and distracted myself as I remembered Aaron describing his monk character Chun-Shi as ‘pulling a Johnny Appleseed, because fuck that demon god and his chance at ever escaping.’

Renee blinked rapidly as she looked at Olivia. “OK, cool story,” she said. “But you want us to... talk to a tree?”

“I mean, it might be able to tell us if there’s any legendary monsters or something that used to live in the area,” Olivia said. “Or a curse on the land, or... I dunno, it might know something useful before we go fight a bull-sized wolf.”

“Pretty sure you said that was just a rumour,” Jade deadpanned.

“Hush, come commune with the tree,” Olivia said.

“Fine,” Renee and Jade both sighed.

I snorted and smiled softly. “Alright. If you girls want to try to commune with the tree, you would usually need a Talk with Plants spell or something even more powerful. But there’s always a chance you can pull this off - this is going to be what’s called a skill challenge, which usually means you need to get more successes before you get a certain amount of failures. This is a sort of long-shot binary question though, so in this case, I need either an Arcana or Religion roll from each of you and each one needs to be a success for you to connect with the Chun-Shi tree.”

"I can do Religion," Rhia said, looking over her character sheet quickly.

"This is what he means by Arcana, right?" Elyse asked Rhia, pointing to it on her skill sheet. Olivia nodded and Elyse nodded. "OK, I have a +5 for Arcana. I'll do that."

"Mmm," Tori hummed unhappily as she looked at her sheet. "Can I maybe use Nature or Survival for this?"

"Nature could tell you stuff *about* the tree, but I don't think it helps with divine communing," I said. "Survival even less so."

Tori blew out a breath. "I kinda suck at both Arcana and Religion," she said.

"Just use the one that's better. That's probably religion?" Rhia asked.

"Yeah, it's just a +1 though. OK, let's try this. All at once, or one at a time?"

"Let's go all at once," I said. "The three of you each put a hand on the tree, trying to focus into a meditation-like state. Renee, you can feel just the slightest tug on your innate magical power, like a child is barely tugging at your sleeve. Olivia, you whisper a prayer to Revelry and feel the chaos of your deity start to form a gossamer strand between your soul and the tree. Jade, your mind goes back to the constant repetition and mental focus during your training in Foot Flurry Wuju. Go ahead and roll."

All three of the girls rolled and quickly did the math.

"Seventeen on the die, so an eighteen!" Tori said excitedly.

"Nineteen total for me," Rhia grinned happily.

"Um. Twenty-five," Elyse said.

"Wait, really?" Rhia asked, looking over at the other girls dice roll. "Holy crap. Natural twenty!"

Tori cheered. "Nat twenty! Yes, Renee!"

Elyse looked happy but confused. "Is that good?"

"Yes!" Rhia, Tori and I all said together.

Chapter 8

“All at once, the three of you feel a rush of strange feelings. Your bodies feel expansive, huge compared to what you’re used to, but also buoyant like you could float away. The only thing that keeps you grounded is the feeling of the rough bark of the tree on your hands. Everything else has fallen away,” I said once we had gotten over the Nat 20 Elyse had rolled for the attempt to commune with the Chun-Shi tree.

“It’s quiet, until a voice speaks out of the misty void in your mind. ‘H-hello?’” I put on a variation of the voice I usually used for kids, quickly scribbling down an idea into my notes.

“Hi,” Olivia said. “Can you hear us?”

“I- I can,” I replied, still using the voice. “Wow, I can! Hi!”

“Howdy,” Jade said.

“Hey, uh, Mr Tree,” Renee said.

“It’s so nice to talk to someone,” the tree said. “I used to have more trees around me, but now it’s all little peoples like you but they can’t talk proper.”

“Well, hopefully we can teach some more people to talk to you,” Olivia said. “Do you have a name?”

“Ummm, not really,” the tree said. “I’m usually just ‘the big tree’ to you little peoples. Sometimes they call me pretty though, and that’s nice.”

“Well, you are very pretty,” Jade said.

“Are you going to be my friends?” the tree asked. I was really laying it on thick.

“Oh, it’s so cute,” Elyse said, then shook herself and tried to get back in character. “I think we can be good friends, Pretty.”

“That would be great,” the tree said.

“Pretty,” Olivia said. “Do you like having little peoples around you?”

“Oh, yes,” the tree said. “Well, most of the time, anyways. Sometimes they make little hurts on me, but so do the squiggles and the woodpeckers and it’s not so bad. Most of the time the little peoples are nice though. They like my apples, and they throw parties around me, and I like the music!”

“Isn’t party music just the best?” Olivia grinned.

“The best,” the tree agreed.

“I think we’ll have to have lots of parties, then,” Olivia said. “Right, girls?”

“Sure,” Jade agreed.

“Absolutely,” Renee nodded.

I had them hooked.

“Hey, Pretty,” Jade said. “Do you think you could answer some questions for us about what was here before the little peoples made their town?”

“Oh, um, I can try,” the tree said.

“Were there ever any big monsters around here?” Renee asked.

“Um... big monsters?” the tree considered. “None bigger than me. At least not that came near me - lots of seasons ago there was a bunch of big peoples flying through the sky.”

“The Dragonstorm,” Olivia guessed, referencing another of my old campaigns. Melissa and Dan really had told her the big plot points of all of them.

“I dunno, maybe,” the tree said.

“What about smaller than you, but bigger than us little peoples?” Jade asked. “Any big predator animals that used to be around here?”

“Um.. yeah, I think so,” the tree said. “For a while there was a big bear who liked to eat my apples. She got extra big because I liked feeding her, but then she didn’t come back one day. After that, there was a Howly that would scare off all the animals for a long time, and my apples just rotted into the ground instead of getting eaten up.”

“A Howly?” Olivia asked. “Do you know what it looked like?”

“Like a Howly,” the tree said.

The girls all glanced at each other, amused but a little frustrated.

“Did the Howly eat other big animals?” Jade asked.

"I dunno. Probably. That's usually what scares them. And it would howl every night, and I could hear it even if it was very, very far away. That's why I called it a Howly."

"Wait, did the Howly talk to you?" Renee asked.

"One time," the tree said. "It asked me a question, but I forgot it."

"The Howly communed with the tree..." Olivia muttered, mostly to herself. "So it must have been intelligent enough to have divine or arcane power of some sort."

"Maybe!" the tree said, not really helping.

"Pretty, thank you so much for your help," Jade said. "We'll try and come back soon, but we think there might be other Howlys out there that are scaring all the little peoples around here and we don't want that, so we're going to go try and scare the Howlys. When we come back for a party, is there anything we can bring you?"

"Um... Maybe a party bow?" the tree said. "I had a big party bow once when the little peoples had a big party in front of me. I looked extra pretty that day, all the little people said."

"We'll get a pretty bow for you for sure," Renee said.

"Absolutely," Olivia agreed. "Alright, I think we end the communing there."

"Bye!" the tree said, and then I cleared my throat. "OK, so, anything else you'd like to do in town?"

"Well, now we know that the big thing in the woods might be more than just an alpha wolf," Olivia said. "But I don't know what else we can do to prepare unless we know more."

In the end, the girls decided on a couple more tasks, which Tori came up with. Since they were planning on going out into the wild to track and hunt wolves, they wanted to hire someone who knew the area - and who better for that than a local trapper who could double as someone to manage the two pack donkeys they purchased, *and* who could skin the pelts of the wolves and whatever else they killed. They agreed on a flat rate payment, plus a cut of the proceeds from any pelts they brought back, and struck a deal with a grizzled old veteran woodsman named Fergus - I had intended for him to be a wily and wiry, somewhat elderly man, but somehow the girls finagled him around to being in his late fifties but more of a former lumberjack-turned-silver fox.

With their new paid comrade and a couple of donkeys with the supplies they might need, they set off for the wilds.

Chapter 9

I didn't make the actual trip too difficult for the girls - they'd been able to rest up at the town, but I wanted to make sure their first session had a good variety of stuff going on. And more importantly, I wanted them to have a sense of accomplishment coming out of the first session and level up from one to two. Low-level gameplay was fun, but it was a little more deadly for some characters than others. Once they got into the level 3 or 4 range I wasn't risking a character like Renee getting destroyed by just a couple of bad rolls.

The girls, and their guide Fergus, headed out of town and into the hinterland hills where the farmers and shepherds had mostly abandoned their homes. They ended up arriving at one of those farmsteads as night was starting to close in, about a day's travel from the village, and decided to try and set a trap for the wolves. Using the empty barn, they locked up one of the donkeys with Fergus inside and then tied up the other donkey outside in the yard. There was an argument among them about whether it was right or wrong to use the donkey as bait, but in the end, none of *them* wanted to be the bait and they promised each other their first priority would be saving 'Phil.'

I thought it wasn't a great idea to name a donkey they were using for bait, but then I might have been a bit jaded. Rhia's father Dan had once played a Druid who specialised in summoning animals and the number of cows that had been sent to their doom in deadly dungeons and dragon caves, not to mention the one used as a distraction in the Unholy Halls of Despair, had reached absurd levels.

Still, they came up with a half-decent plan so I wasn't about to punish them. They rolled Perception checks, and within a couple hours of sunset, Jade - the most sharp-eyed of the bunch - spotted the prowling wolves as they slowly made their way through the abandoned fields.

Of course, the girls then had to decide *when* they would spring their trap. Too early and the wolves could just run off. Too late and Phil the Donkey was a tasty snack.

It was a tense few minutes in-game as I described the hunting and stalking of the wolves, and the girls eventually sprang their trap moments before I was going to have the first wolves dart in try try and hamstring Phil. They had the element of surprise, having watched from up in the barn hay loft, and Renee was able to cast her big Magic Missile spell from above while Jade and Olivia slid down ropes they had tied off and positioned for their attack.

The fight was quick but dangerous. There were four wolves in the pack and they each paired off to fight Jade and Olivia. They each ended up needing to fight back to their feet after the biting of the wolves tripped them up, but Renee was crucial in putting the wolves down before the hand-to-hand fighters got taken down again. By the time the fight ended, with the last wolf fleeing, both Olivia and Jade had suffered some bites. It was just when Olivia was healing Jade again with her Lay on Hands spell that they heard the surviving wolf let out a long howl.

And that howl was answered, louder but far off, by another howl.

“Fuuuuck,” Elyse said.

“OK, we need to decide what we’re going to do,” Tori said. “Cause it sounds like whatever that was is coming for us, and it’s probably not going to be happy. Rhia, Olivia is still hurt, right?”

“I mean, I should be OK... probably,” Rhia said, wincing a little but sounding hopeful.

“Do we try to do the same thing as before?” Elyse asked. “I mean, I didn’t think we’d be fighting something else that’s big. I already used my two big spell slots, so I just have my little spells.”

Rhia looked at me. “Do we think that thing is coming for us, or was just answering the howl?” she asked.

“Do you speak Wolf?” I asked.

She gave me a deadpan look.

“Well, I guess you’re not sure,” I said with a little smirk.

“Well... are we going to use Phil as bait again?” Tori asked. “Or should we swap him out for Seymor? I think it’s only fair, Phil already played bait once.”

“OK, if that thing is coming here, I doubt we need bait,” Rhia said. “It’ll smell the dead wolves.”

“But if it’s smart it might stay away because of the dead wolves,” Elyse pointed out. “Should we hide them?”

The girls got to work, pulling the three wolf bodies into the barn and then doing their best to cover up the blood with dirt so it wasn’t as obvious. Then they decided that Phil had been through enough, and they didn’t want to risk Seymour (who I pieced together was the other donkey). They ended up getting back into their ambush position, watching from the hay loft of the barn, and since Olivia was still injured she tried to get in a short rest.

I had them roll perception checks for every twenty minutes in-game as they tried to stay vigilant, while I rolled behind the screen for when ‘the beast’ would show up.

It was right at the hour mark that I rolled high enough, which was just enough time for Olivia to have gotten her rest so I allowed her to use some natural healing to recover her lost hitpoints.

She was going to need them.

The creature that came out of the woods and started padding across the fields wasn't trying to be stealthy. It may not have been 'as big as a bull' but it was definitely a little bigger than one of their donkeys, and that was *big* for a canine. They couldn't *tell* it was a wolf-shaped creature at first though. I described how the first thing they noticed was its golden eyes as the moonlight glinted off of them, and then they noticed that a strange yellow-orange mist of energy seemed to follow in its wake as it moved.

The creature headed straight for the farmstead, its big and shaggy form still agile and almost sinuous in its movements. When it got closer, just outside the yard where the fight had happened, it stopped and sniffed the air.

Then it growled, its eyes turning an angry red, and that growl the girls could feel deep in their bones. And it looked right at them up in the hayloft.

The fight, if the girls hadn't positioned themselves the way they did, could very well have been deadly for the three of them. I'd planned the fight with *six* characters in mind, and the action economy of the game was a pretty powerful factor in what made an easy or hard fight. When the girls came up with their plan I'd decided not to tweak the encounter.

The wolf-creature, a modified Warg, had the size that it was able to jump up and bite at them at the edge of the hayloft hatchway. The battle went back and forth, Jade almost getting pulled over the edge and into the yard when she got caught - if the girls backed off too much, the warg could try and scramble up *into* the hay loft, but if they stayed too far forward it could yank them out and that would be a disaster.

In the end, with all three of the girls wounded, the donkeys screaming in a panic as Fergus tried to keep them calm, and the warg looking pretty hurt by the burns and cuts along its face, shoulders and forelegs, Olivia threw caution to the wind and jumped out of the hay loft, coming down right on top of the warg and driving her blade deep into its back.

The warg let out an immense, ear-shattering death howl - more powerful than it ever should have been able to - before it died.

The mop-up was fairly quick, we'd been playing for almost four hours and I didn't want to go much longer than that so I didn't draw it out afterwards. The girls were able to rest after the battles, and in the morning Fergus set to work skinning the wolf pelts - they were damaged, but in his words, 'Salvageable.' The warg pelt in particular would make a fine sale despite the sword wound in the back purely due to its size.

As I described the girls starting to head back to the village, their spoils hung on the back of the donkeys, I could tell that Rhia and Tori both assumed the session was over.

It was, almost. But not quite.

“As you come over the final hill, the sun is setting over the village, and all seems at peace,” I said. “But as you get closer, you see even less of the townsfolk than you did on your first visit to the town. And as you reach the centre of the village square you see three things. The first is that the Town Hall front door has been sundered open and hangs off its hinges. The second is that the Inn windows and doors are missing, and there are heavy scorch marks around each opening, stretching up the sides of the walls as if there had been a fire.”

“Oh, no,” Jade said.

“Oh, fuck,” Olivia cursed.

“But what’s the third thing?” Elyse asked, obviously feeling nervous.

I’d had options of how this would happen. My original plan had involved the Headswoman they’d gotten along with. But then they’d given me a juicier target.

“Dragged into the centre of the village square is a big apple tree,” I said. “Cut down with haphazard axe strikes that must have taken an hour or more to accomplish. Its branches are broken and hanging limp where they haven’t snapped off completely from its collapse. And carved into the trunk is a circle with the vague shape of a howling hound, as if up at the moon rising above you.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Tori shouted, actually throwing the folder with her character sheet in the air.

“No! Fuck, no!” Elyse said, her eyes actually brimming with tears.

“We’ll find them,” Rhia said, gritting her teeth hard as she held onto the edge of the table so hard I could see her knuckles turned white. “We’ll fucking find them, and we’ll fucking end them.”

“And that’s where we’ll end the session,” I said.

Chapter 10

There were complaints, but they were the kind of complaints that I was used to after a particularly juicy emotional cliffhanger. I honestly felt like I'd outdone myself - if I wasn't sure that Rhia would be sharing the story of the game with her parents, I would have held onto that first session to use with my regular group in the future.

Tori was a bundle of energy afterwards, already trying to come up with schemes of how they could track down the bandits who wore the symbol they'd found. Elyse had the exact reaction I hoped for, which was that her emotions gave way to energy as well as she fed off of the others and realised that, first, this was a tragedy *in game* and not in real life - in real life they had a week to talk it out and plan what they were going to do, and soon she was caught up in rehashing the fight with the warg.

I ended up finishing putting away my DMing gear in its various cubbies in the game room before they'd even stood up from the table, and it was only when Rhia's stomach grumbled that they realised we were well into the evening.

"The good news," I said as they started to clean up their stuff, "Is that once you have your long rest in the village, you'll have levelled up! Rhia, I know you know what you're doing. Tori, are you good with levelling and helping Elyse out with that during the week?"

"Sure, Shane," the Indian girl said with a grin, then turned to Elyse. "You're going to get more hit points, and another spell slot, plus some other stuff," she said. "The trade-off is that Shane gets to throw harder monsters at us, too."

"There's harder than that giant magic wolf?" Elyse asked in surprise.

"Way harder," Rhia chuckled, looping her arm through Elyse's and pulling her from the room. "Is it OK if we get changed before we go, Shane?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, waving them towards the bathroom and my back bedroom.

The girls changed, and when they came back out they were in their regular outfits from when they'd arrived. I was struck again at how... well, how *coed* all three of them were. They very much fit the part of 'pretty and modern college student' despite having varied styles and looks.

Rhia was the first one to hug me, thanking me for the game, which wasn't strange at all. But then I found myself getting pulled down into a hug by Tori.

"Thank you so much for running the game for us," she said. "Even if we scared off the boys. It's so good to play again and you're *awesome* at being a Dungeon Master."

"You're very welcome," I said as I hugged her back lightly, one-armed. I wasn't shy about hugs usually, but this *was* the first time I'd met her. And there was no avoiding the fact that she was a full hugger - I was very aware of her curves as she squeezed me tight for a moment.

"Thanks for helping me learn the game," Elyse said, stepping forward and hugging me as well, squeezing me even tighter than Tori and even pressing her cheek to my chest. "Seriously, this was so much fun and I can't wait to play again." She pulled away, grinning, and then slapped a hand on my chest playfully. "Even if you're a fucking mean bastard for killing a pretty tree!"

I laughed, having hugged her back the same way I had Tori. "Say that back to yourself and consider how mean I really am, or if we're *all* just really good at playing imagination."

She smirked and rolled her eyes. "OK, when you put it like that, maybe I'm overreacting."

"Fuck no," Rhia said. "He did that shit on purpose. He *is* a mean bastard."

"That's me, DM Meany Pants," I chuckled.

Tori and Elyse gave me little waves, grabbing their backpacks and heading out the door, but Rhia said that she needed to talk to me about something quickly and asked them to wait a second, then she closed the door.

"What's up, Snorey?" I asked. "Don't tell me you're actually mad about the tree."

"No," she said, "Well, yes, I am, but I know that's the game. I just..." She trailed off and chewed the inside of her cheek for a second as she looked at me. Usually, I could generally tell what was going on in her head, but this time I wasn't sure *what* was going to come out of her mouth.

"Rhiannon, just spit it out," I said. "I promise not to judge, unless you've decided to dedicate yourself to being a Mime. Then I will judge you harshly."

She rolled her eyes at the joke that had gone around my circle of friends for a couple of decades. Then she took a breath and let it out, looking at me seriously. She was always pretty, her youthful features even making it tough to take her seriously sometimes, but in that moment I could tell that what she wanted to say was something she meant. "That was a really fun first session," she said. "And I think you've really hooked Elyse. But I was kind of hoping the game would be a little more like your game with my parents."

"Well, it takes time for it to be like that," I said. "Big stories start best from humble beginnings. Just because you're fighting wolves and bandits now doesn't mean where we end up at the end of the summer won't be much bigger and badder, and just as fun a story as what you've been hearing all these years."

“No, Shane,” Rhia said. “I mean... When I was setting up this game and everything, I was hoping it would *be like the one you play with my parents*. Um. Content-wise. With the same sort of... role-playing.”

I felt the blood run out of my face. I opened my mouth, trying to think of what to say, because what she was insinuating would mean she knew things she shouldn't. There was no way she could.

“It was a couple of years ago,” Rhia said. “Mom and Dad had asked me to sleep over at Kelly's house since they were hosting game night, just like I always did, and I was doing that. But I had my driver's license and had driven myself over, and we got talking and Kelly wanted to watch a movie we had on DVD since she hadn't seen it before, so I figured I would just scoot back home to grab it and grab some snacks if you guys had an unopened bag of chips or something.”

“Rhia...” I said, feeling like our world for twenty-three years was crashing down around my ears. Our secret world.

“You guys mustn't have heard me open the front door. I only saw a bit, but it was enough,” she said. “I saw Aaron and my Dad double-teaming Veronica and I was like ‘what the *fuck*,’ and then I heard Mom moaning about how good ‘the Count's’ cock felt in her ass, and I got out of there without anyone seeing me. After that, I put the pieces together and realised that you guys have sex as part of the roleplay in your game.”

I could remember the game that must have been, even if it was two years prior. Count Fiorenzi had been hosting a masquerade ball, but the masks had been cursed by Madame Isabella D'Lorenzo, the player character's shady benefactor - she wanted them to use the resulting orgy as a cover to steal the Count's art collection because one of the paintings held a secret map to an ancient shrine. Of course, the way we played, the orgy had to be played out.

I, as the DM, had played the Count. And I'd definitely fucked Annabella Lashley, Rogue Extraordinaire's ass that night.

Melissa's ass.

Rhia's Mom's ass.

And she'd heard it.

“After that, I paid even more attention to the stories my parents would tell me and would be guessing about where sex might have happened,” Rhia said. “And my imagination kind of ran wild. And it didn't help that I would occasionally... spy on you guys, to see if it was a one-time thing or not. Not for long, I just had to know it was actually happening, that I hadn't dreamed it.” She was blushing now, but it was like she'd uncorked a conversation topic she'd bottled up for so long that she couldn't stop talking even if she wanted to. “And it was so *hot*, and I wanted to -

well, I didn't want to join in because my parents were there, but I wanted experiences like that. Fun and friends where we could *be* like that. And then Tori told me she played and was interested in playing more, and things sort of snowballed from there, and I was hoping that, since you were the DM who got *your* group of friends playing like that, maybe you could do the same for us."

I had to take a long, slow breath in and then let it out. Of all the things I might have guessed would come out of Rhia's mouth, I had not been expecting all of that when I encouraged her to spit it out.

"Rhia," I said slowly. Carefully. "What me, and your parents, and our friends do... it's been our secret for a *long* time. And if it got out-

"No, I know!" Rhia said. "I've never told anybody about it. Not a single person."

"OK," I said. "But what we do was something that developed naturally. It's not something that just happened out of the blue. We were young and horny, and we took things too far and it turned out OK, but it could have been really bad if it didn't."

"That's fine," Rhia said. "Honestly, Shane. I only invited people to the game who I knew would at least be interested."

"Interested is one thing, consenting is another. Not to mention trustwrothy," I said. "And you didn't exactly ask *me* for my consent either."

"I- That's- Well, I'm asking now," Rhia said. "Please?"

I closed my eyes and wiped my hand over my face. "The guys bailed on you," I pointed out. "And if they bailed on you that easily, they don't sound like the kind of guys you want to drag to the table *or* the kind of guys who deserve an opportunity like you wanted to give them."

"I know, and that kinda sucks, but we can still do it," Rhia said. "Elyse and Tori are both bi, and I'm a little more experienced than bi-curious. And none of us are pure little virgins."

"Rhia," I groaned.

"You can't tell me you wouldn't fuck Tori or Elyse if you had the chance and they were open and consenting," Rhia said. "And they think you're hot. Attractive. And now they really like you for the game, too. And... I would be down to fuck you, too. In the game."

Now I was blushing, the blood pumping right back up into my face, trying not to dwell on what she was saying.

“Look,” I said. “I... fuck, Rhia. I can’t blame you for wanting what you want. *We* keep doing it because it’s fun, and you’re an adult who can make adult decisions. But there are lines here. Like - I have to tell your parents you know, and what you want this to be. I can’t hide that from them. They’ve been some of my best friends for *decades*.”

“I figured,” Rhia said. “But what if they say yes? What if, despite all the big question marks in your head right now, they tell you they are OK with it? Would you help make it happen?”

I closed my eyes, leaning back against the wall of my hallway. “I can’t see a world where they are *OK* with me and you having sex,” I said.

“But it wouldn’t be us,” Rhia said. “It would be Olivia of Parnasus having sex with... a Duke. Or a monster. Or Fergus.”

In that moment I realised how Fergus had somehow started getting described as ‘a beefy lumberjack.’ Rhia had already been dreaming up potential sexual situations in the game.

“You said you couldn’t blame me for wanting what you guys get to do already,” Rhia said. “So is it really a big deal that I want to do it with someone I know is safe, and will make sure we have fun but don’t get into trouble?”

“God, Rhiannon,” I sighed. “Trying to make logical arguments about this isn’t helping.”

“Just tell me that, *if* you talk to my parents and they say yes, you’ll help facilitate some sexy fun within the game,” Rhia said.

I knew the correct answer was to say no, but I was fighting a double-sided war in my soul. My position of ‘this is wrong’ was surrounded by the recent memories of how hot Tori and Elyse both were in their own ways. And then there was the pleading look on Rhia’s face, her big eyes and slightly quivering lower lip that I knew she was doing on purpose but I still couldn’t ignore.

The last drop in my bucket of shame was her cleavage in my peripheral vision as I focused on her face.

“Fine,” I sighed. “But that is a massive, gigantic *If*, Rhia.”

“Thank you, Shane,” she said, crashing into me and hugging me tightly. “I promise, if they say no way, I won’t bring it up again. I’ll respect it. But until that happens I’m going to fight like hell for it to be a yes. I want this to be the best summer ever and I can’t imagine it being any better than getting to make my dream game a reality.”

I felt awkward hugging her back, but I did, and then she tilted her chin up to kiss me on the cheek before slipping away towards the door. “The girls are waiting on me, so I better go. Thanks so much, Shane. I’ll see you next week!”

The door shut, and I knew she was making her escape while the getting was good. Before I could change my mind.

“Fuck me,” I groaned, taking a few steps down the hall and then heading into my office, collapsing in my desk chair. I pulled out my cell and thumbed it open, staring at my contacts for a long moment.

“Hey, Shane,” Melissa said as she answered. “What’s up? How did the game go?”

“Mel, we gotta talk about your daughter,” I said.

“Uh oh,” Melissa sighed. “Should I go get Dan for this?”

“Yeah,” I said. “You’ll both need to hear this.”

Chapter 11

“She knows about The Game,” I said.

Dan had joined Melissa and they were both on speaker. I could imagine them sitting in their living room, side-by-side. Part of me felt like I should have just driven over there to have this conversation, but the other part of me knew being face-to-face would make this a lot harder.

Now, the way I opened the conversation seemed innocuous, by my intonation was everything. The Game. Capital T. Capital G. Our group of friends had called it that for twenty-three years. It was a way of talking about the sexual encounters we had with each other during the course of our D&D games specifically. We could talk about ‘the game’ all day and know we were talking about the combat, or the storyline, or who was bringing the snacks. But ‘The Game’ was a different matter.

“Fuck,” Dan said.

Melissa was silent.

“She just told me before she left,” I said. “She’s apparently known for a couple of years. Caught us the night of the Masquerade Orgy.”

“The one with Count Whats-his-face?” Dan asked.

“Count Fiorenzi,” Melissa corrected him, somehow still keeping her head on straight and correcting her husband about proper names and places like always.

“That’s the one,” I said. “She says she hasn’t told anyone, and I believe her.”

“God, this is going to be awkward,” Dan groaned. “We can’t just... ignore this, right? Like, pretend everything is normal and we’ll just... get on with our lives?”

“She told him for a reason, Dan,” Melissa said. “She told you for a reason, right Shane?”

I swallowed and nodded, then remembered they couldn’t see me. “Yeah,” I croaked out.

“God damn it,” Melissa said.

“What?” Dan asked.

“She’s trying to replicate the situation,” Melissa guessed. She always was quick to catch on to any mysteries or plots I put in front of the party. “She wants to have a Game like ours, not just a game.”

“Oh,” Dan said. “Well, that’s not- I mean, she’s twenty. Same age as we were when we started things, right? And you had the whole talk with her about birth control and stuff.”

I was not surprised that Dan had left that talk to his wife to have. He was one of my best friends, but the reason he and Mel got along so well was that he was laid back and happy to put his nose to the grindstone and provide for his family while she took charge of pretty much everything to do with the home and family dynamic.

“I don’t think we could stop her if we tried,” Melissa said. “And we’d be gigantic hypocrites if we tried to punish her or something. Even if it *is* a bad idea.”

“We haven’t even hit the big one yet,” I said.

There was a moment of silence on the phone.

“Oh, fucking *come on*,” Melissa said. “Really?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“Wait, what else?” Dan asked.

“She wants her Game to be the one Shane is running for her, not just tips to run it herself or something,” Melissa groaned.

“Jesus Christ,” Dan said heavily. And then he snorted.

“What’s so funny?” Melissa asked.

“I- Nothing,” Dan said.

“I’m missing the punchline here too, buddy,” I said.

“OK. I just - it was a *momentary, errant thought* - but I thought ‘Like mother, like daughter,’” Dan admitted.

“Dan!” Melissa scoffed, and I could hear her slapping his arm.

“What?” he asked. “You have to admit, babe, you *were* the one to start things off way back then. The first one to flash some skin, the first one to make us all get naked when we got into the city baths. The first one to give a celebratory blowjob - still one of the best I’ve ever gotten.”

“Well, I wasn’t the first one to actually have sex,” Melissa said, her argument a little weak. That had been Jack and Veronica, but they’d already been in a relationship and been fucking for a couple of years *prior* to The Game.

“Either way, she put it out there to me, blunt as can be,” I said.

“What are the boys like?” Melissa asked. “Trustworthy? Is she interested in a specific one?”

I sighed heavily. “The guys bailed on the girls,” I said. “One got dragged back to his home state or something by his parents, and two of them didn’t want to dress up in character like the girls. So it was just me, Rhia, and her two friends.”

There was another long moment of silence, and then they both spoke at once.

“She wants to do it with just you and two other girls?” Melissa asked.

“You saw that Tori girl in costume?” Dan asked. Then corrected himself, “Wait, Mel is right - just you and the three of them?”

“It sounded like Rhia had been hoping the boys would be down, and the experience would bind them tighter, so her original plan wasn’t just with four people. She was... pretty blunt, like I said. She said both Tori and Elyse are bisexual, and that she’d be interested in sex with me in the Game. I gave her some reasons why it was a bad idea, and I probably could have given more now that I think about it, but I was a little stunned.”

Melissa sighed heavily. “Where did you leave it?” she asked.

“I told her I had to tell you guys all of this,” I said. “And she knew that was coming. She wasn’t trying to hide it or anything. Then she asked, if you guys said yes, would I be willing to move the game in that direction. I told her I couldn’t see you guys saying yes - I mean, it’s Rhia. And me. But she pressed and gave me that puppy dog look she does, and I mean, Tori and Elyse are very pretty and looked hot in their character costumes, so...”

“So you put it on us,” Melissa said flatly. “Instead of being the big meany yourself.”

“Hey,” I said. “I’ve always been the FunUnUncle. She’s your kid.” ‘FunUnUncle’ had been my official title for Rhia when she was younger, and then later for Jack and Veronica’s three kids, and stood for ‘Fun Unrelated Uncle.’ I was officially Aaron and Rachel’s son Archer’s Godfather, so I’d gotten an upgrade there.

“Great,” Melissa sighed. “You’ve given her an inch, now we have to fight her for the mile.”

“Hey,” I said. “You were the one who asked me to do this game for her and her friends

“He isn’t wrong, babe,” Dan said. “You didn’t see this coming?”

“No, I didn’t see this coming!” Melissa said. “Seriously, Dan?”

“You’ve been able to read her mind since she was six,” Dan said. “She’s literally complained to me that she can’t ever get away with anything because you know what she’s going to do before she does it.”

“That’s because she’s just a mini-me,” Melissa sighed. “But I never had parents who had The Game. I definitely fucking missed this one.”

“So what do you want to do?” I asked.

“Let us talk about it,” Dan said. “And it sounds like we’ve got a really fucking *awkward* family conversation to have.”

“Want to come DM it, Shane?” Melissa asked, managing to crack a joke.

“Not a fucking chance,” I said. “Look. I wish you amazing rolls on insight and diplomacy, OK? And you know I’ll back you one hundred per cent. If you want this game squashed, you tell me and I’ll come up with a reason. If you’re OK with it going, but it’s just a normal game, she already promised me she’d never bring it up again and I’ll try to forget this ever happened.”

“And if we give the green light?” Melissa asked.

I swallowed the spit in my mouth. “Is that really even on the table?”

“We’ll let you know how it goes and what we decide, Shane,” Dan said. “Thanks for telling us right away.”

“Of course,” I said. “And... I’m sorry, you guys. I didn’t see it coming either.”

“OK, we’ll chat,” Melissa said, sounding tired. “I guess it’s a good thing this is an off-week for *our* game. Wouldn’t *this* be a great conversation to have with everyone?”

“Bye, guys,” I said.

They signed off as well and we hung up. I set my phone down and shook my head.

Everything had been going great with the new game, even with the bailing players, and then Rhia went and pulled this.

And I knew, despite my best efforts, it was going to be hard not thinking of Elyse or Tori when I was alone at night trying to get to sleep. Or Rhia.

“Shit,” I sighed.

Chapter 12

I opened the door and Mel stepped into my house.

“Hey,” I said.

“Hey,” Mel said, looking a little tired.

“Long night?” I asked.

She nodded, and I gestured for us to head to the kitchen. Dan worked a sales job in tech, and I worked from home, so it wasn't uncommon for Mel to drop by for a coffee some mornings to shoot the shit before I got to work on my graphic design gigs. She was always interested in hearing what brand I was designing the packaging for and cared less about my recurring gigs with the local sports teams.

I put a new pod in the Keurig machine, starting up a second cup, and sliding the first one that I'd just made over to her. She took it black and after a long sniff of the dark roast, she took a sip and groaned softly. She gave me time to get my own coffee in front of me, and to sit down across from her at my breakfast table, before we spoke.

“Last night was stupid,” she finally said.

“OK,” I said. “Gonna need a little more detail than that.”

She sighed and set her mug down, burying her head in her hands for a moment and working her fingers through her curly brown hair. Rhia had gotten her colouration but Dan's smoother, straighter hair type, but I knew from plenty of experience that Mel's hair was fun to play with and grab onto in the middle of sex in a way that Veronica and Rachel didn't like as much, and they had hair more akin to Dan and Rhia.

“Well, let me just tell you, having a talk with your adult kid about how you and your husband have been pretty-much-swingers since before she was born isn't the fun you might think it is,” she said. “I wasn't thrilled at hearing what she'd seen. I feel like a shit mother for not having noticed anything changed after she caught us the first time.”

“Maybe nothing did,” I said. “I mean, Rhia's always been a quick-thinking kid, Mel. Just like her mother. She saw it, processed it, and didn't let it affect her relationships with either of you.”

“Yeah, well, the fact that she saw Dan in a threesome with Aaron and Veronica, and heard me taking it in the ass from you, still makes me feel like she *should* be traumatised even if she was already eighteen,” Melissa said. “Not to mention the fact that she apparently spied on us a few more times. Thanks for not including that in your warning call, by the way.”

“Hey, I was dumping a *lot* on you guys,” I said. “If I missed a few details, I feel like I did pretty well giving you the gist of things.”

She sighed again and took another swig of her coffee. “That’s fair, I guess,” she mumbled and then shook her head.

“She argued her case pretty hard, didn’t she?” I guessed.

“Until the wee fucking hours of the morning,” Mel said. “I should have made her join the debate team in high school, she’d have won some awards.”

“And then she would have been even *more* dangerous arguing with you,” I smirked a little.

“Hey, I’m not wrapped around her finger like you or Dan,” Mel said. “That puppy dog look doesn’t work on me.”

“Which is why I left it to you to tell her no,” I said. “How disappointed was she?”

Mel shook her head, looking into her coffee. “She used every fucking trick in the book. Dan gave up arguing after a couple of hours - honestly, I’m proud of him for lasting that long. Usually, he would have given in or given up with her in twenty minutes. In the end, it really just came down to whether we were hypocrites or not on her side, and whether I could get over the idea of you and her together on mine.” She looked up from her coffee at me. “This wasn’t somehow your idea, right? Like, I love you, Shane, and I don’t think this is what it sounds like it is, but as a mother I have to ask - you didn’t put this idea in her head, right? You weren’t grooming my daughter?”

“God, Mel,” I said, immediately feeling disgusted and betrayed that she would think that, but I wrestled that feeling down enough to acknowledge that I would be asking that question of any other man in Rhia’s life that might have fit into the spot I was in. I took a breath and looked back at her meaningfully. “No. I never talked to her about anything like this, ever. I’ve only ever tried to be a positive person in her life. Hell, I hadn’t even seen or talked to her since her fall performance.”

Melissa looked into my eyes for another long moment before nodding. “OK,” she said, releasing a breath. “I knew it, I’m sorry I had to ask.”

“I’d be asking the same thing of Jack or Aaron if they were where I’m at right now,” I said. “It stung, but I understand.”

“Thank you,” she said, then drained her cup. “I told her OK, she can do it.”

I blinked a few times. “I’m... sorry, what? You said yes?”

"I said yes, Shane," Mel said. "To her getting to play the Game the same way we do. And I told her all the bloody fucking risks involved with that. About how it almost broke up Jack and Veronica early on, and how Aaron and Rachel had such a hard relationship for a while even if they ended up happy. And I told her the truth about how Dan and I weren't dating when I got pregnant."

"You didn't tell her about the DNA test though, did you?" I asked.

"No," Mel shook her head. "That would have been... maybe too much. She did an ancestry DNA test last year anyway - at the time she said she was just curious, but now I realise she was probably checking if Dan wasn't her father. Obviously, he was, but we knew that already."

I nodded. The question at the time Mel had gotten pregnant was whether it was Dan, me or Jack. That had been a tough few months before we could confirm it. Mel had made it clear she wasn't getting an abortion. That was the incident that almost broke up Jack and Veronica. When the paternity test came back as Dan, they'd gotten together and stayed together and I'd been thrilled for them.

"Still," I said. "This is..."

"Her choice," Mel said. "I know she's been sexually active. Hell, at her age, so was I even before The Game. We all were. And she thinks that she, Elyse and Tori will only get closer if it happens, and she admits that she was only hoping and guessing about the guys being the right fit, but had figured it might just be a summer fling sort of situation."

"But what about me and her, Mel?" I asked. "That's a line that can't be uncrossed."

Melissa pushed her coffee mug aside and reached across the table, taking my hands in hers. "You're a fantastic lover, probably my dearest friend, and someone she trusts implicitly to the point of feeling safe wanting you part of this fantasy she's built up. You're also single, so there isn't any complication like that, and I feel like I'd be robbing you of what can only be one fucking wild experience if all three of them actually do want to fuck. And I'd be robbing her of doing this with you as a safety net because I know if she panics or decides to back out you won't pressure her or judge her."

"Shit," I said. "Mel, I- You're sure? For real? Because any hesitation for you and Dan means I want to pull the fucking ripcord here."

"No hesitation," Mel shook her head. "Well, I mean, lots of hesitation getting to this point, but not after. Dan keeps reminding me what we were like at her age, and how we raised her to think for herself and trust her gut judgement."

I took a breath. "Fuck," I said.

“Fuck,” she replied, nodding.

“I’m going to need to talk to her,” I said. “I don’t know what she’s expecting, but you know it’s not just an on-off switch.”

“I told her, but it’ll help for her to hear it from you,” Mel said. “This is her choice, and if she doesn’t listen to you and rushes it and makes things weird with her friends? Well, she’s been warned of the risks.”

“OK,” I said, leaning back in my chair and taking a big, long breath. “Fuck,” I said again.

“Yep,” Mel smirked. “You will be.”

Chapter 13

Game Day. It felt a lot different than the previous week. In the run-up to the first game session, I'd had a little bit of the New Campaign Jitters; just a bit of excitement to start something new, and with a new group.

In session 2 of a campaign I was usually still getting a feel for the characters, and looking for a way to really kick things into gear while giving the players the chance to flex their muscles a little bit to establish the new personalities and how they interacted with the world. I'd have a stack of notes to give each player a personal hook or two in the next few sessions, and by session 5 we'd be deeper into the plot and things would unravel naturally as I managed the world and the minds of the antagonists more than a specific plot.

I had two scribbled notes and a vague plan. I felt woefully underprepared compared to normal and would be improvising a *lot* for the session. It wasn't even that I wasn't used to trying to plan potentially sexy moments - sometimes they happened impromptu in the regular group, and sometimes I had something set up ahead of time just like a set piece boss battle.

No, sex didn't scare me at all.

The college coeds did.

The doorbell rang, about fifteen minutes before game time, and I went and let Rhia in.

"Hey, Shane," she said, stepping in and giving me a big hug just like usual. Nothing weird about it, except I was a little more... *aware* of her chest pressing against me.

"Hey, Snorey," I said. "Come on, we need to talk quickly."

"That's why I'm here early," she said, following me into the game room. She'd brought her backpack again, probably holding her costume and gaming accessories, and was wearing a simple crop top T-shirt that hugged her bust enough that I could see the outline of her bra and showed off her thin stomach. Simple black yoga leggings covered her from the waist down.

We gestured for her to sit in the seat she'd picked for the game, and I pulled out the chair that Elyse would occupy next to her rather than going to my DMing chair at the head of the table. I didn't want this to feel like it was necessarily an Authority vs Player conversation.

"So what's up?" she asked. "Is this about what Mom agreed to?"

I gave her a deadpan look. "Rhia, what else would this be about?"

"Well, you *did* say you would go along with it if my parents said yes, and they did," Rhia said.

"I know," I said. "But we still need to talk about it."

"Shane," she said, looking a little hurt. "You promised! Don't fucking back out now."

"I'm not- God, Rhia. I'm not backing out, stop looking like you're going to pout," I said, and she looked a little abashed and set up a little taller, wiping the worry from her face. "We need to talk about how what you want could actually *happen*. I know your Mom told you it's a process, and doesn't just happen, but did she tell you anything else?"

Rhia screwed up her face a little. "Vaguely? I mean, she didn't want to get into any details really, which I guess is fair. But I just assumed that you'd be able to guide it."

"I can't," I said. "I mean, I can provide opportunities for things to escalate, and nudge things to be more comfortable, but..." I stopped to take a breath. "What do you think the reaction would be if you guys went to meet with a shopkeeper and he said, 'I'll sell you this sword for ten gold, or I'll give you a 20% discount for a blowjob?'"

"He'd sound like a creep," Rhia said.

"And, if it came out of nowhere?" I asked.

Rhia's eyes opened wider and she sighed. "You would sound like a creep, too," she said.

"Right. And I definitely don't want to be known as the creepy old guy to your friends," I said. "For a whole host of reasons, that would be very bad. So I can't ask, or demand, anything from you guys. With your parent's group, we know each other's lines and turn-ons and turn-offs so sometimes I *can* be forward to the right people and it leads to stuff, where in any other setting it would be seen as creepy as hell."

"So I guess me just *offering* a blowjob to the theoretical shopkeeper would be a bit of a harsh starting point too, even if it is just a game," Rhia frowned.

"Probably," I said. "You know Tory and Elyse better than me, but they seem like they can take a joke. Comfortability, and making things feel normal at the table, is a process."

"So what you're saying is that I need to be the one to start things," Rhia said. "And it needs to be slow."

"Correct," I said. "You need to... you need to seduce the table."

Rhia snorted softly and smirked. "I don't think I've ever seduced anyone. I've always been the one getting seduced, or chased."

"Well, think of it as practice for when you find the guy or girl you really do think is worth it," I said.

“OK,” Rhia nodded. “I can do that. Um, do you have any suggestions on how to start?”

“Flirty stuff between you and the others,” I said. “I realised after we talked that you must have picked Revelry as Olivia's deity of choice so that it wasn't an obvious 'Lust' thing but gave you some freedom to be sexy. I think that will help. You can flirt with NPCs too to normalise that.”

“Just flirting?” she asked. “That feels... pretty slow.”

“Well, what would be the next step to seducing someone after flirting?” I asked.

“Kissing,” she said. “Or physical touch over the clothes. Or - well, I guess dirty pictures wouldn't work in fantasy land, but... flashing?”

“If you think the situation is right,” I said. “A lot of it will be about vibes in the room.”

“OK,” Rhia nodded, then took a breath. “Thanks, Shane. For taking this seriously. For taking *me* seriously. I know this is a big, weird thing I dropped on you and my parents. It means a lot that you're willing to do this.”

I sighed and shook my head slightly. “I'm still a little in shock, honestly. But the hypocrisy element is real. I can't tell you not to want it.”

“Well, you're not a hypocrite, and you're a fantastic, mature, *real* person in my life,” Olivia said. “And I appreciate you so much.”

Now I nodded and smirked a little. “Thanks, Rhia. That's- Well, I guess that's what I always wanted, but I never thought it would be like this. Come on, help me grab some sodas from the beer fridge in the garage.”

We stood, and she followed me through the house. “Do you think we could maybe go for more than sodas?” she asked. “A little alcohol would help with the vibe, probably.”

“None of you are twenty-one, Rhia,” I said. “That whole reputation thing? Adding 'he got us drunk' to the start of those bad stories does *not* help.”

“OK, but we all drink. We're college students,” she countered. “What if we bring our own booze?”

I hesitated. We were in the garage and I had my hand on the beer fridge handle. I blew out a heavy breath - booze had always been at The Game table. Beer, shots, it had been a general social lubricant at first, then it helped with nerves early on as things got wild, and then the drinking lessened but we all still enjoyed a drink or two on game night.

“One each,” I finally said. “If you want to buy in bulk, you can keep a case here to last a few weeks.”

“Thanks,” she said and stepped forward and kissed me. On the mouth. It was just a peck, but it was the first time she’d ever done that. She pulled back, looking into my eyes, judging how I reacted. A peck like that wasn’t something that made me uncomfortable - I’d had hundreds, if not thousands, of kisses over the years during The Game and while dating. A peck was just a sign of affection. Still, coming from her, it was a line that was getting crossed.

“You’re welcome,” I said, smiling softly and meeting her eyes without panicking or getting agitated.

She grinned. “I’ll call the girls, see if they can pick something up for us on the way.”

We carried in a few cans of Sprite and Coke and she made the call to Elyse since Tori would be driving, passing on the news. The two roommates were already on the way but readily agreed to make a stop at a liquor store and pick up a case of something.

I didn’t ask how they were going to do that without being twenty-one, deciding it was in my best interest not to know things that I might need to pass on to Mel and Dan.

“OK,” Rhia said as she put down her phone. “Anything else we need to do to get ready? They’ll be here in maybe ten minutes.”

I tutted lightly, thinking, and then nodded. “We don’t need to have the conversation this week, but just as a head’s up - at some point the four of us are going to have to have a frank talk about consent,” I said. “And sexual health. I trust you’ve all been safe before, but it’s a ‘trust and verify’ situation. I have multiple sexual partners to consider, and they have their partners too. If Tori or Elyse have anything that could get passed on, that’s a major problem. And I need to know about birth control - I’m not afraid of a condom if things get that far, but knowing we’re being safe helps everyone stay relaxed.”

“That sounds awkward as fuck,” Rhia said. “But... I guess it makes sense.”

“That includes you three all getting tested for STDs,” I said. “And sharing the results, not just telling us them. I’ll do the same.” Rhia made a face, obviously feeling even more awkward about needing to do that. “You’re asking to participate in what is basically going to be group sex, Rhia,” I said. “These are the consequences of your desires.”

“OK,” she sighed. “That makes sense. God, I can’t imagine what that conversation would have been like if the guys had been involved too. At least I know it won’t be as bad with just Elyse and Tori. They’ll get it.”

I shook my head, still sort of floating through grappling with Rhia's initial plan and the big holes it suffered from. *But*, I thought to myself, *You don't know what you don't know*. It was tough to blame her because she'd been working from a fantasy understanding and glimpsed moments of The Game.

"I think that's everything, then," I said. "Any questions for me?"

Rhia pursed her lips, tapping her foot lightly on the ground. We were both standing in the game room, leaning against the backs of the high-backed chairs. "Can I get something out of the way?"

"What's that?" I asked.

Rhia stepped up to me and lifted her arms to circle around my neck. She was somewhere just short of six feet, and I was just a little over six feet, so she didn't need to pull me down very far at all to pull me into a kiss. This one wasn't a peck, it was deep and full, and I kissed her back as my hands went to her hip and side. She wasn't as experienced a kisser as I might have guessed, and I could tell she was exploring a bit. Then she teased her tongue forward, and I allowed it and teased her back.

I broke away first, both of us a little breathless.

"Sorry," she said. "I just didn't want our first real kiss to be awkward and scary in the game. Now I'll be a lot more confident if Olivia decides to make out with a cute NPC."

"No problem," I said. "And if that's how Olivia kisses, that NPC might just be a little stunned."

She grinned a little impishly, taking the compliment well, and then bit her lower lip and looked at mine again. I squeezed her hip slightly, but then let go, and she took the cue and stepped back just a little.

"Alright," I said. "Why don't you go get changed, and you should be ready for when the girls get here?"

"Sounds good," she smiled, not perturbed that I hadn't pushed for more kissing. She turned and grabbed her backpack from the floor, bending at the waist to do so, and made a point of looking over her shoulder at me as she did it. She grinned and wiggled her tights-clad butt - it wasn't big or juicy, just a normal butt, but what man couldn't resist at least a glance at an attractive ass clad in tight pants?

"Go," I sighed and rolled my eyes dramatically.

She stood up with her backpack and headed out of the room to get changed.

I sat down, shaking my head. I'd kissed, and been kissed, plenty of times, but me and Mel, Veronica and Rachel never kissed before The Game started. After, when The Game had been particularly intense, sometimes. But never without it being initiated by a character and NPC interacting. Rhiannon was already changing the rules on me and we hadn't even gotten started.

It had been a pretty good kiss, though.