Chapter Nine

Hello There

I’d worried that, randomly wandering the forest like we’d been, even if *I* knew how to keep us moving in a straight-ish line, we’d miss whatever it was that we were looking for.

But I needn’t’ve bothered.

Because we were being *herded.*

Mind you, whoever was doing it messed up the first few times, as, when a small group foxes and deer came at us from behind, trying to force us forward, I stopped, turned around, and Kobeni, Kaylee, and I *killed the fuck out of them,* but eventually their controller gathered a mob of them that just stood there, watching us.

Giving Mel a ‘Well, go ahead’ gesture, the woman, after several moments, did approach them, only for the mass to growl, snarl, and make other ‘don’t come near’ noises, causing her to return.

While they didn’t attack, they did make us go around, though part of me wanted to say, ‘fuck it’ and go *through* them, but this was a fact-finding mission, not an *extermination* one.

*… Yet.*

The brigade of beasts, once we were going in the correct direction, backed off, though, starting to drift to the side, they returned, standing in the distance, watching us, but not approaching either.

But, hey, if they were going to give us time to recover our Chi, *I* wasn’t going to complain, though I *was* going to keep vigilant.

Which is how I found the pit trap.

I could feel the voids in the earth in front of us, most of them buried, but several lead to a larger one, dead ahead, only the barest covering of earth in front of us.

“Kobeni,” I stated calmly, the girl flinching a little, looking around fearfully. Pointing ahead, I raised a thin ridge along the pit’s edge. “Walk Rishu up to that, and be prepared to dump a fifth of your reserves into a flamethrower attack. You’ll understand when you see it.”

“Y-Yes,” she nodded, doing as I asked, while I concentrated, not feeling anything shifting underground.

I had nothing *close* to any kind of seismic sense, but if they started digging extra tunnels, I would’ve picked *that* up, but, no, whatever was watching us wasn’t reacting to our words, or our sudden pause, at least not to *that* extent.

Moving up next to her, and mentally gripping the ground we were standing on in case they tried to *dump* us into the pit, I widened my stane, reached my hands out, and gripped the inch-thick level of sod, held together seemingly through grass and roots alone, and *pulled.*

Revealing… *horrors.*

“**Now!**” I commanded, though I didn’t need to, as the girl was already shrieking in terror, Rishu opening its mouth wide and unleashing an inferno into, just, *all* the insects.

Because the pit was *full* of them, *thousands* of them, all larger than they should be, from centipedes the size of snakes, to goat sized assassin bugs, to, was that a fucking *brain slug?*

Yeah, it was, but its ‘Oh I’m just silly little guy; I’m harmless!’ camouflage it’d use to sneak up on you and *eat your brain* was useless in the face of the ex-Devil Hunters nearly atavistic *‘OH GOD KILL IT WITH FIRE!’* response to everything that was *around* it.

And the mass of creepy crawly *death* tried to surge up at us, but with a twist, and a stomp, I created a curving wall atop the rim of the pit that *wasn’t* spewing *flaming death*, extending the smooth stone down into a single piece, the drain worth the safety, as Kobeni turned the trap into a *hellpit*, the sound of what seemed like the world’s largest, *wettest* popcorn going off filling the air, as well as the chittering screeches of the dying horde reached up, the thick, black, cloying smoke rising into the air, and the nearby trees lit in reds and oranges.

“And this,” I commented, the construct next to me drawing down on its stream of incandesce, “is why we trained up before we entered.”

Having turned the trap into an *oven,* I reached over and rubbed Rishu behind its flaming ears, as she was a *good girl*, *yes she was!*

I ignored the part of me that pointed out that I was technically stroking Kobeni’s *soul.*

The construct wagged its Fire tail, and I gestured the others to come and take a look, which they did so, the twenty foot deep pit, ten feet long and *forty* feet wide, now *glowing*, the mass of bugs having formed plugs in the three tunnels that led into it, and stopping it from venting outwards, though whether that was accidental or a tactical move I couldn’t be sure.

“Focus on the Sensory aspects of your Cultivation, and you will be able to find your foes by the bits of it that they carry, or how they have moved it around you, though this is only a trick that works against mundane foes,” I instructed, “as the Presence of those who are in the same ballpark as you, or of greater strength, will spread out to cover what they carry, if you have not attuned yourself to it *specifically*. Though, really, I only trained this because of the Dire Badgers, and getting up to snuff in a combat sense is probably a better way to spend your time.”

“What would you have done if you had fallen in there?” Mel questioned, looking at it with distaste.

I shrugged, “Same thing *any* of us should’ve done.” Momentarily growing my armor into spikes, only forming the Chi into the suggestion of stone before reclaiming it, I declared, “Go murder-blender. It wouldn’t’ve worked on, like, half of what was in there, the chitin on those centipedes like armor plating, but it would’ve gotten me enough time to use a movement technique and pull myself out of it. Honestly, without Kobeni, this would’ve been a *pain* to deal with.”

“R-Really?” the girl in question replied, doubtful.

“Oh, *yeah*,” I affirmed. “Fire, as an *energy*-based attack, doesn’t work in the same kinetic paradigms most of what we can use right now has to use. You’re a hard-counter to most armored foes, though, as you’ve seen, fur is more of a deterrent to you than it is to the rest of us. It’s not exactly rock-paper-scissors, but having a variety of styles diversifies our strengths, which is why most adventurers work in teams of at least three, and mono-Style groups tend not to last too long without something hard-countering *them* into oblivion.”

Starting to walk around the pit, I turned back, as the others hadn’t moved. “We need to keep going.”

“That was meant to *kill* us,” Mel stated, oddly unnerved.

“And the hordes of animals we normally face *aren’t?”* I replied, confused, before I made the connection. “Oh, you thought they were just going after the *townsfolk*, and, since we were no longer with them, we’d be safer.” I couldn’t help but laugh. “No, this is *absolutely* a trap, so let’s go spring the next one. I wonder if they’ll try and drop something on us this time?

**<LDW>**

They did not, in fact drop something on us.

Instead a fucking *Titanboa* came crashing through the forest, like a fleshy runaway train.

And not the normal kind, the *Megafauna* variety, to the point I had just enough time to toss Kaylee back before the fucker swallowed me whole.

*Dumb bitch.*

Growing a bit of extra stone to lock my armor’s joints, sealing my helmet to stop its acidic juices from hitting my face, I reached deep inwards, and then started to *grow.*

**Stone** spikes emerged from every surface of my armor, sharp ridges that its compressing flesh cut itself against, and, while parts of my protections cracked, and were worn by pressure and acid, I just *made more*.

While I couldn’t pop the fucker like Naruto, I *did* stick in its throat something *nasty*, and could feel it flail, slamming me into a tree, but all that did was drive me *deeper* into its softer tissues, its own stomach acids burning *itself* more than me, everything dark, but I could feel the earth rise and fall as it reared up, and came back down, writhing in pain, the movement of muscles on me reversing as it tried to spit me back up, but I was *exactly where I wanted to be.*

Holding my breath, I focused on my Chi, the lack of ability to move a limitation, but it was, at the end of the day, a *crutch*, as I *was* my Chi, my body only a puppet that responded to my will, an extension of it, and I needed it to use my Chi as much as I needed hand gestures to *talk.*

Settling into a meditative trance, I continued to grow, not turning them permanent, but reinforcing them, like installing supports in a mine as one dug a tunnel, focusing on giving form to my Chi, instead of letting it just fill the space, fractal patterns forming in my mind’s eye as I visualized the mass of spikes and edges I’d become, feeling as my opponent still struggled, and, with an acceleration that *had* to be a strike, took the *literal tons* of **Stone** I’d created and *PULLED,* yanking it to the side, foiling its aim and feeling the shock as it struck a tree instead, breaking off the ends of several spikes, letting them be moved about, before *growing those too.*

As I did so, I felt something… *give,* and expand, as I instinctually started doing so for *everything* I was using my Chi for, and for a moment I could see the bloody insides of the Titanboa’s throat, glowing, as I was, with yellow light.

*Hello, Seventh Level of the Houtian Realm.*

I was burning Chi, even as my reserves grew and intensified, the use of it that much easier, but it was very much use it or lose it, and the longer it fought, the more likely it was that it’d *kill* one of my teammates, which, past the *obvious* reasons to not want that, would mean we’d all likely perish shortly after.

Slammed over and over into things, *finally,* the beast went still, and I tried to let out a relieved breath, only, right, *sealed suit.*

*Note to self, add an air tank to the next one.*

Now, *pressurizing* it would be a pain in the ass, but just another couple breaths worth would extend my operation time by another twenty minutes or so.

Feeling a little light headed, I absorbed the extra **Stone** around myself, though the partially dissolved bits were too far from their pure expression that I wasn’t able to do so easily, and I *really* didn’t want to force it. Besides, leaving that as it was provided a rough scaffolding that kept the snakeflesh off of me, the absorption of the rest having *not* resulted in a vacuum, because Cultivation only had a *loose* relationship with physics.

Either way, that let me move, and, concentrating… yeah, Mel was fifteen feet *that* way, which was awefully close and *ohfuck!*

Flinching back as a Metal blade carved into the cavity I’d left behind, I realized what they were doing, and reaching out, I slowly created a pillar of stone outside, unable to see what I was working with, writing ‘Stop!’ in raised lettering, her swords retreating.

Moving forward, shoving gauntleted hands into the incision, I was able to shove it open, and tumbled out, the grass sizzling. Wiping my visor clear, it was pitted and distorted, but it was easy to fix that, seeing Kaylee and gesturing to myself. She said something, but I’d blocked myself up, and she realized I couldn’t hear her a moment later, washing me off once more.

Once I was clean, I dismissed the stone blocking up my helmet, and took a deep, gasping breath, the edges of my vision, which had started to darken, extending out once more.

“Ooohhh, okay, that happened. Getting swallowed *always* sucks, but on the bright side, I was *literally* the worst one of us it could’ve done that to,” I smiled, stretching, turning around, seeing the bits of various trees still on fire, and taking in the full extent of our vanquished foe, *oof*. “Anyone more than bruised or battered?”

“It *ate* you!” Kayle exclaimed.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” I deferred. “But *damn* am I glad I made this armor.”

She stared at me. “It. ***Ate.*** You!” the mechanic repeated.

“…Yes? Did you hit your head while I was in there?” I checked, concerned. “The physical effects of a concussion will be undone when we re-Loop, but if you’re feeling out of it-”

“I! *You!* ***Yúchǔn de yīngyǒng qíshì!****”* she exclaimed, pointing at me accusatorily.

Turning to L, I requested, “Translation?”

“She was worried you’d died,” the blonde noted. “And we’re fine. Knocked around a bit, but it was… *distracted.*”

“Cutting it up from the inside would do it,” I agreed, looking at the creature, wondering why we hadn’t seen it yet, and, creating an obsidian dagger, cutting into it, smelling it, there was no hint of infernal, celestial, or fey taint, which means it wasn’t *summoned*, so… *why now?* “Eh, let’s keep going. Oh, and Kobeni, reclaim your Fire before we go.”

“Y-Yes!” the Asian girl responded, pausing, asking, “Are you really okay, Lee?”

“I’m *really* okay,” I reassured her. “Just a little low on Chi myself. Hit seventh level in there, actually!” I laughed, shaking my head. “Like, I get why adverse conditions inspire breakthroughs, but *damn* if it isn’t kind of bullshit. Now come on, I’m interested in what they’re going to throw at us next!”

**<LWD>**

Nothing.

The answer was nothing.

Nothing *at all.*

We walked, and walked, and walked, for hours upon hours, to the point I regretted not bring rations, though Kaylee could make water on demand, as we progressed deeper and deeper into the forest, the trees getting *fantasy* levels of big, the light fading as the sun started to set, the forest turning even darker, though distant luminescent flora and fauna could be seen glowing here and there, giving us a sense of positioning, the distant glow like living stars, until we finally found ruins.

Which…. Was a very, *very* bad sign.

“Oh, huh, glowing rocks,” I commented, finding the remains of a magical lantern, the faintly radiant blue crystal inside holding traces of ancient magics, enough that I couldn’t easily call it to me. Walking over to it, and, with a *yank,* breaking it free to study it, feeling it out, yes, the crystal, while nice and pure, was merely the anchor for the enchantment, the ephemeral nature of its Arcane working something that just did not compute to my Cultivation.

“Didn’t you tell us *not* to touch the glowing things?” L inquired, more sarcastic than accusatory.

Tossing it to her, I clarified, “*Innately* glowing things. *That’s* just a magic lamp.”

“If I rub it, will I get three wishes?” the blonde teased.

“If you do, I’d appreciate a way out of here,” I shot back. “We’ve already hit the contract requirements, *technically*, and I’d like the facilities I was promised.”

“We’re still being watched,” Mel noted, clearly *trying* not to look at the shapes that hid behind nearby trees.

Moving past the crumbling outer walls, we found more complete ruins, lit up in an ethereal blue glow, the marble construction covered in ivy and other plants, I replied, “I’d be more surprised if we *weren’t.”*

“We, we can’t fight them all, can we?” Kobeni questioned, holding tight to Rishu’s faux-furry neck for comfort, the construct now the size of a small horse, and uncomfortably warm to be around, having grown as she’d grown along with her worry. I shook my head. “O-Oh. I. I didn’t think so.”

“But, with some answers, and some training, we could,” I reassured her, patting her on the leg as comfortingly as I could, careful of my taloned-fingers, on her cloth pants, which seemed to help.

As we went deeper, the ruins became more and more prevalent, until, “There’s some writing on this one,” L stated. “It looks a bit like dicotapoid, but…”

“It’s in Elven,” I stated. “It shares a script with Sylvan, which I speak, but it’s kind of like seeing Spanish as an English speaker. Well, *French*,” I corrected, thinking about how most Elves acted.

“I speak both of those languages,” the Agent noted.

I nodded, “Yeah, the MiB doohickey that teaches you languages is *super* useful, though The Company’s is better, as it handles supernatural languages as well, and doesn’t require secondary reinforcement.”

“Wait, you mean to tell me she *cheated!?”* Kaylee exclaimed.

The ex-MiB Agent turned a cool look towards the mechanic, “I didn’t cheat, I used to tools I had to-”

“Cheat,” I finished for her, . “Minimum time to become *conversational* in a language is six months. You speak over two hundred languages. You are not at least a hundred years old. Ergo, you did not learn them the normal way, thus, you mentioning the number of languages you know as an intellectual flex is akin to someone who heavily uses steroids flexing their muscles, only even more of a useless gesture.”

*“Liú kǒushuǐ de jìnǚ hé hóuzi de yúchǔn nǚ'ér!”* the spacer accused.

“Probably not, though it *is* a petty move that relies on the ignorance of others,” I agreed. “But *focus*, Kaylee, I think that’s where we’re going,” I advised, as we entered the ruins proper, not a single building intact except for a large structure in the distance, the space empty of trees, yet, if anything the tree cover, hundreds of feet up, only *thickened.*

And the animals weren’t even *pretending* to hide.

“Dweamorcats, and Decapi, and Owlbears, oh my,” I observed, cataloging the magical creatures that hadn’t been sent against us. Then again, dweamorcats were only really dangerous if you cast spells on them, and the Decapi were ambush predators, though watching the man-sized land-octopi trying to roll across the field to get to us would’ve been more *amusing* than worrying.

That said… “Kobeni, you can handle absorbing a bit of the Ercinee’s fire, but don’t overdo it,” I advised, gesturing towards the horse sized parrot/eagle with twin green flames for eyes. “L, take down the Chickcharney as its melee attacks will curse you with bad luck. And-”

“Is that a *dragon?”* Mel demanded, and I turned, as if there was a *Dragon* then-

“Oh, it’s just a Forest Wyvern,” I dismissed. “If it follows the pattern, then the tail stinger’s poison, breath is acid, standard bullshit, I’ll handle it.”

“The *dragon,”* the Piltovan checked, floating swords held protectively around herself.

I snorted, “Don’t give it a big head. An *actual* Green Dragon that size would wreck our shit. And also have *magic.* And ***hands****.* That thing’s just as controlled as the rest.”

*Though I’d have to seal my suit again, because other than some basic hardening, I’ve got no real defense against poison,* I added internally, as we headed towards the main building, the small *army* of animals leaving open a pathway to it, and, *yep,* were closing up behind us.

“Lee,” L noted, and, glancing her way, she subtly jerked her head the way we came.

“Only way out is through,” I agreed, glad I’d had time to fill up my reserves, especially since the stone around us was charged in a way that I *couldn’t* easily absorb, containing an energy that was anathema to my own.

From the size of the ruins, and the extent, this wasn’t some ancient city, as those were *huge,* but it was certainly an outpost, or small town, though the fact that none of the locals I’d talked to had known of such a location said… *not good things.*

Professor Croft’s ‘High ROI Archaeology’ Seminar didn’t really help me here, the structures too left too much to the elements to easily identify possible treasure caches, not that we could’ve gone for them anyways, and the ‘Citybuilding’ ones I’d taken had both emphasized how sufficiently advanced enough magic warped normal architectural requirements to the point that building Absurdly Spacious Sewers actually *made perfect sense.*

So we had a main avenue, leading to a main building, which was fairly standard, crumbling walls that still extended high enough to either be *absurdly* spacious rooms or seven to nine story buildings, but this was *elven* construction, so it was probably only half that. Most of the markings on the walls had long ago worn away, or were covered with growth, the irregular surfaces serving as good attachment points for the plant life.

Given Elves weren’t big on logging, and the walls we’d first passed were more marble fences than battlements so this wasn’t a *military* outpost, what few signs remained pointed towards either religious or ideological reasons, a small outpost like this the Elven version of ‘Fuck it! I’m gonna go live in a van by the river!’

Larger buildings by the gate, and more complete destruction further away, likely due to smaller and/or more wooden construction, had me pegging this place at no more than a couple hundred at full occupancy, in some ways a bit like Oakville, though I’m sure the original residents would be *deeply offended* by the comparison.

Then again, they were *Elves*. They were *deeply offended* by *American Cheese.*

But the Fantasy Not-French were no longer in residence, and, as we slowly walked, all of us ready for a fight, asking them about their opinion on the ruins that surrounded us could wait until we’d reset.

No, we needed to focus on more *immediate* concerns.

Reaching the main structure, a *green* light coming from within that mixed with the azure light from the ruins, we climbed broken, crumbling stone steps, white stone nearly invisible over a mess of roots, weeds, and general overgrowth, the front giving serious ‘temple’ vibes, though I couldn’t spot anything close to a holy symbol I was even passingly familiar with, and I’d had to study *hundreds* of the things just to hit the ‘most common’ ones.

Reaching the main doors, we entered, and saw it.

A tree.

A *big* tree.

A *big* ***glowing*** tree

A *VERY big* ***glowing*** *tree.*

Glancing upwards, I realized that all of the cover we’d been under wasn’t the trees at the edges reaching in, no, it was this *one* tree reaching *out,* and, now that I could see it in its entirety?

Yep.

*Glowing.*

And with a *whiff* of the Divine in the air.

***Fuck.***

This was a ***Religious Conclave***.

And whatever the inside of this building used to be, it was now an amphithea-

No.

It was a *Court.*

The various magical animals were arrayed around a clearing right in front of it, and if that bit of root wasn’t a fucking *throne* I’d eat my helmet.

“That bad, huh?” Kaylee questioned, her attention not on the spectacle, but on me.

“Still doable. But yeah,” I agreed, and, realizing that I’d stopped, took a deep breath and continued onwards, keeping my Chi flowing through my pathways, ready to strike if need be.

Not that it would probably do us much good.

“Whatever you do, don’t strike first,” I ordered them. “Not unless you want us all to die in *very* short order.”

While I moved slowly, Mel, also recognizing the setup, *didn’t,* using faster, sure steps to move in front of us, coming to a stop the proper distance for visiting courtiers, and very clearly positioning herself as the *spokeswoman* of the group.

Which was… sure.

It’d be amusing to watch at least.

Coming to a stop a dozen feet behind her, the others followed my lead, and, for a moment, all was silent, except for the faint sound of swaying branches.

And then the bark in front of us *rippled,* and a dryad stepped out, but not a *normal* one.

A person with tree branches on her face

Description automatically generated

*Hamadryad?* Was my first thought, but, no, those Queens of their kind were *beautiful* in an unearthly way, while this thing… Something was *wrong* with it.

It was certainly *powerful,* I could feel that from here, but a Hamadryad, those things could put down *Dragons* without breaking stride, and while I could sense its presence, all around us, thicken, like cloying mist, it was somehow chaotic, *uncontrolled*.

The Dryad didn’t walk, but *glided* over the ground, it’s lower half a trailing mass of vines and leaves that roughly resembled a dress, as it took its seat on its throne, the wood underneath it glowing an almost Fell green, and it regarded the Metal Cultivator curiously, not saying a word.

“Your Grace,” the noblewoman greeted, when it became clear our ‘host’ would not speak. “It is good to finally meet you. I believe there has been a *grave* misunderstanding, and I would request your understanding, and wisdom, in finding a way to settle this matter without further bloodshed.”

To my left, Kaylee leaned over to me, and whispered, *“Did she miss the part where all them animals were tryin’ ta kill us?”*

Mel froze, as the Dryad’s head snapped over, with the sound of a twig snapping, and regarded the mechanic.

“Let Mel talk, please,” I urged the brunette, with a look that hopefully conveyed that I’d explain *later.*

The incarnated nature spirit turned to look at me, her head tilted oddly, and, despite my outwardly opaque visor, she stared me directly in the eyes, with her unnatural, unblinking stare, shifting back towards our diplomat, who tried to continue her attempt, smiling as she stated, “I am sure that, if we were aware of the reason for your enmity for the nearby human village, we could find some way to settle things without further difficulties.”

The dark-skinned woman stood, waiting, not flinching, as the being regarded her for several long minutes, before it responded, in tones of rustling leaves, the swaying of branches, and hints of distant birdsong.

**“&… difficulties?&”**

She, however, did not do so in *English.*

“I, I’m sorry, I don’t speak that language,” Mel, to her credit, responded. “But I assure you I mean no harm, and-”

**“&But I *do.&”*** it countered, tone one of mild mannered malice, never opening its mouth to do so, the dryad speaking in *Sylvan,* language of the *Fey*, which I retained knowledge of, even if I’d transferred out of their clutches, though I was under no illusion that the being in front of us worked for *The Company.*

*Yeah… that’s about what I thought,* I sighed internally.

Rallying, though she did almost cast an aborted glance my way, *clearly* rattled, the Piltovan attempted once more, “I, you clearly understand *me,* but is there, perhaps, someone who could translate? There can be no cooperation without communication, after all,” Mel smiled, though the tension in her expression was undeniable. “Perhaps-” she took a step forward, only to flinch back, as the roots under her feet struck out like snakes, sliding off flash-formed boots, as the woman danced back.

**“&But I do not wish cooperation, especially for one such as *yourself,&”*** the Dryad sneered.

*Okay, good try,* I thought, taking a step forward, inquiring in Sylvan, myself, my words not carrying the undercurrent of power that the dryad’s did, “&And what do you consider us to be, then?&”

With another snapping noise, it shifted focus, eyes narrowing slightly, as it once more regarded me. **“&Ah. The lead dog barks. But it is your *owner* I would have words with.&”** it declared imperiously.

“You speak it’s language?” Mel questioned, unnerved.

“Sylvan, language of the Fey, my old employers,” I reminded her. “Favored by forest spirits, such as the Dryad before you.”

***“&I Am No Mere Dryad!&”*** it snapped, brow slightly furrowing, its wooden visage more mask than face, and not conducive to movement.

Kaylee edged behind me, “I think you made the tree lady mad, Lee.”

“Oh, it was already mad,” I reassured her, looking at the creature, “&And, given you clearly believe to know what we are, yet also we clearly do not possess a similar understanding, would you be, oh Lady of this Forest?&”

Drawing herself up, the enormous, oak, green light shining from cracks in its bark, vibrated as well, as her Presence swelled, but it was… *odd,* and not in line with something as impressive as the mega-magi-flora *should* be, given the Weave-adjacent patterns I’d been seeing on my way in.

**“&I am Querciana, Queen of Trees, and Originator of all Dryads&!”**  she declared. **“&I am powerful beyond your mortal, meaty comprehension, and I-&”**

“Bullshit,” I spat, cutting her off.

Glaring at me, the tree behind it quivered with rage, but the timing…

“**&You dare speak to me in such a way!?&”** Querciana, if that was *even her name,* demanded.

Not bothering to put it in her language if she was just going to *lie* to me like that, I replied, “I dare if *you* dare to expect that such a blatant exaggeration is even worth *listening* to. You? The *Ur-Dryad?* ***Really?***” I waved around us, “This is impressive, don’t get me wrong, but while there is a whiff of the deific here, it’s not *that* strong.”

**“&I am more than strong enough to crush you like the insect you are,&”** It informed me, but, that, again, was *another tell,* because beings that strong *didn’t need to tell you they were.*

They either thought you were cute, or they *smote* your ass.

Opening my arms, I couldn’t resist the straight line. “If you strike me down, I shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine.”

L, to my far left, facepalmed, groaning, *“You didn’t just say that.”*

Querciana, *no, fuck it,* ***Q*** looked at me in disgust. **“&*Now* who is lying? I have slain you almost three score, and you remain *weak!&”***

“… what?” I replied, sure I’d heard wrong.

**“&Did you think such magics could stop one such as I?&”** it bragged smugly. **“&I tire of conversing with pawns. Bring out your Chronomancer Master!&”**

“Lee?” Kobeni questioned, unable to understand half the question, but able to read body language enough to get something was wrong.

“Querciana over there’s aware of the Loops,” I explained, which, which she *shouldn’t be,* as that kind of thing, unless one was specialized in the building blocks of a Loop’s formation, like Temporal or high-end Illusionary abilities, should’ve been beyond the grasp of *anything* we’d reasonable be asked to fight.

“Th-That’s *bad,* right?” the Devil Hunter questioned, holding tightly to Rishu.

I wiggled an armored hand. “It’s not *good,* but, workable.” Addressing the Dryad, I called out, “Unfortunately, all you’re getting is us. And trust me, if I could call my boss, *I would*. Though, seriously, you’ve been doing this over and over again. &*Why?&”*

However, rather than respond, the being *attacked,* further showing just how *un-godly* it was.

Roots surged around us, and the battle was joined, as I threw myself forward, towards the Not-Dryad, trusting in the others, coming in for a jeweled punch, only for the being to contemptuously back-hand me, *far* faster than I was, but, as I was sent flying, my armor cracked, I had one thought.

*Weak.*

Flipping myself over, I shoved my chi into the rocks below me, which were permeated with the Wood aligned energies of our foe, but while it was a suppressive force, it was an *accidental* one, allowing me to rip up a chunk to twist about and land on, grunting with the effort to send both me *and* it *right back at her.*

And only then, ten seconds later, did the animals start to attack.

I flipped over and kicked the rock at her, Q lashing out with a bark-covered fist that cracked apart the rock, the bits of **Stone** crashing behind her, leaving her open for *me* to come down with a Chi-filled fist.

Only to be stopped *cold.*

The force was transferred into her face, my wrist straining with the blow, but I hung there for a moment, my foe not even pushed backwards, and it was only a rising pillar of stone that I yanked upwards, slamming it into my own chest and sending me flying away, that let me evade her grip.

Because she was right.

She wasn’t a Dryad.

Dryads were *subtle.*

They beguiled their foes, Hamadryads exponentially worse, to the point we’d be, if we couldn’t resist her influence, kissing her feet and pledging to serve her, not that those kinds of vows were binding in the *least*.

No, this was all *brute* power, and, looking at her closely, I *had* managed to crack her mask of a face, the wound weeping glowing green fluid that, as she pressed one gnarled hand against, repaired itself, but *not on its own.*

Sparing a moment, Kaylee was doing alright, surfing about the battlefield on her own personal wave, a dozen tendrils lashing out at *everything* around her with crushing force, while a Kobeni’s area was *completely* on fire, an angry monkey thing dropping on her from above, only for, in a burst of flame, to be blasted off, it’s front a charred mess, the Devil Hunter’s pseudo-reactive armor doing as it should.

Mel was doing *alright,* lashing out with her blades, cutting through grasping roots and pouncing beasts alike, working with frantic energy, her armor now fully manifested, but she couldn’t keep it up for long, and L.

L was *already* down, bound up in glowing roots, though she had a *thoughtful* look on her face, not a worried one, though, given the Loops, she wasn’t exactly wrong to have that take on things.

Landing on stone, rippling it outwards to tear apart reaching roots, I grounded my momentum and reversed course, back towards Q, who was contemptuously waiting for me, and I wasn’t about to disappoint her.

Forming a gem-tipped spear, I *hurled* it as hard as I could, but slightly off-center, so, while the **Stone** Javelin flew, she batted it aside with ease, the weapon burying itself into the stone beside her.

With the weapon to my foe’s left, I darted right, every step another shove under my feet, as I concentrated my Chi, speeding up more and more, arcing around, swinging a hand out tear the head off a snapping wolf and tossing it at her, the being having to take a moment to stop it from slapping her in the face, and I was on her, hands clawed, as I slammed them both right into her chest, trying to reach *through* her and pierce her heart.

*Try* being the operative word, because I got *maybe* an inch in, my opponents body like, well, *solid wood,* but empowered to stand up to blows that could crack stone, as the being glared down at me, actually eight feet tall, now that I’d gotten close.

Which was fine, as my hands weren’t where I’d concentrated my Chi.

*The spear was.*

Flipping my feet under me, I mentally gripped and *pulled,* the now diamond *covered* weapon, glowing with my bright yellow **Chi** rocketing out, the only stone *not* covered in her roots, and pierced her back, shoving her forwards, her mouth opening as blood dripped from the corner of her mouth, and I grinned, as I-

***PAIN***

I didn’t realize I’d been hit until I impacted the far wall, dazed, but while I was rusty, Earth-*healing* was doable for me, at least in a ‘keep yourself together for the fight’ way, letting me refocus before I hit the ground, and, trying to breath, my ribs were *fucked,* my chest armor shattered, blood splattering around me but my enhanced body could take this, and, in a few minutes, *it wouldn’t matter, would it?*

L was held up, as if as a bargaiing chip, but the blonde was yanked away as I sent another crystal-tipped javelin towards Q, on a path that would’ve gone *through* my teammate.

***“&ENOUGH!!!&”***

A *tsunami* of roots spread out, and, while I tried to stop them, it was too much, and I was bound in an instant with glowing wood, as were the others, Rishu ripped apart, empowered roots piercing the physicalized flame as if it were flesh, leaving a shocked Kobeni to try and burn through her wooden restraints, but unable to. Elemental rock paper scissors only taking you so far in the face of raw power.

Mel went down even faster, and while Kaylee managed to keep away for several moment, she was grabbed too.

Then we were dragged in front of Q, forced to kneel before her, because, sure, *why not.*

Feeling out with my Chi, while I wasn’t restrained *that* way, there really wasn’t a ton I could do here, and half my attention was being spent trying to keep my shattered ribs in rough alignment, so breathing didn’t hurt *as much.*

“So?” I questioned, doing my best to appear unbothered. “You gonna tell us *why* you’re doing this now?”

The slap that Q lashed out with wasn’t appreciated, but was a *fraction* of the strength she’d punched me with before, let alone *whatever* that one ‘fuck you’ blow had been, moving so fast I hadn’t even *seen* it.

Working my jaw, I asked, “&So is that a *nooo,* or…?&”

**“&You Humans never know when to give up!&”** the not-Dryad declared. **“&Always reaching beyond your station! But your meddling freed me, so I shall grant your kind a *swift* death, unlike the children who imprisoned me!&”**

Glancing around, I put it together. “This was an Elven temple, but some Human adventurers freed you. Then why kill the *Human* town?”

**“&They are intruders in my territory. But that little gathering you have defended is only the first step! Their ‘King’ shall fall for claiming *my* lands as his own!&”**

“But the castle is… This is a *war* isn’t it?” I questioned, because of fucking *course* it was.

Which is why Q kept trying to go cheap on the forces sent to kill *us*, because she was gonna need the *rest* for her march, but…

But that *wasn’t how Nature Spirits* worked.

Unless…

Looking at her, and then the tree behind her, both glowing with the same energy… “Ah. You aren’t the tree. The tree is your *prison.*”

Which meant she wasn’t anything I could think of, as this was some ‘chained evil’ bullshit.

Which *we’d* been hired to *put the fuck down.*

And given the metaphysical equivalent of *squirt-guns.*

At least on Loop one.

**“&One I have subverted, one I have turned into strength, and one I will be free of soon!&”** Q declared, having gone full ‘I’ve had no one to talk to for ages so I’m monologuing’, which worked just fine for me. **“&I would have already, would have taken its strength for my own in full, if my work had not *kept being undone!&”***

“Sorry not sorry,” I quipped, catching another backhand, but, yeah, while it was harder, Querciana, when she wasn’t channeling the strength of the Mega-Oak, was in the ‘stronger than me but take-able’ category. And it was clearly *it* that was somehow controlling the local fauna, though, given she hadn’t even *nudged* us with its raw power, there was probably some kind of conceptual ‘of the forest’ tag that we lacked, and thus provided it no hook into us.

“So, you’ve got us dead to rights,” I observed. “What now?”

**“&It is clear that, should you die, I will once more be forced to start anew. But the solution to that is easy. *You shall remain bound!&”*** Q crowed, quite proud of her, honestly, pretty basic bitch conclusion, as roots reached up and gagged me, before I could respond.

“So that’s your plan? Just *keep us here?”* I checked, incredulous.

Leaning down to put her face in mine, she finally spoke English, declaring, **“You have lost. Accept it. Now behold my ascent to-”**

*“*A*A****AAA****A*A*A****AAAA*H!**”

The pained cry came from my side, and for a moment I assumed it was a ‘I’m gonna torture you but make sure not to kill you’ thing, but, no, Q was just as surprised as I was, and, looking over, it was *L* who was screaming, her body flashing **Green**, again, *and* ***again****,*  and-

Our bonds started to loosen, the next flash of green shot through with black streaks-

***No!*** I thought, recognizing what she was doing, and we needed to leave, *now.*

So, focusing my Chi, I flooded my helmet with it.

***And Crushed It.***

**<LDW>**

Coming to, sitting bolt upright, the beeping alarm ignored as consciousness flared into being, I was up before L started **screaming** again, now free, clutching her head, the skin on her hands rough, almost bark-like, and cracking, traces of green light shining through, launching myself over the table and grabbing Mel by back of her shirt as she blearily stirred to life, taking the noblewoman with me as I moved to L, whose flesh was starting to warp further.

Grabbing the Metal Cultivator’s hand I shoved it to the back of L’s neck, and commanded, ***“Shove Your Chi Into Her!”***

The woman hesitated, looking confused, and started to argue, my other hand flying out without hesitation, knocking the other woman’s head back, but my grip on her with my other jerked her back, as I thundered, ***“DO IT NOW!!!”***

Thankfully, the idiotic *girl* realized now *wasn’t* the time to talk, and did what I ordered, the Metal aligned Chi the hard-counter for L’s Wood aligned energies, just as L’s countered my own, and while the second-level woman couldn’t overpower her now *sixth-*level teammate, it was enough to restrain it for me to dive into the blonde’s Cultivation with my *own*, and *tear it apart.*

Destroying it completely would’ve been easier, but might also *kill her,* ***for good***, so instead I dug out the foreign energies, the Arcane and Deific energies the *stupid* woman had tried to take into herself, very much like the snake trying to swallow *me*, with similar results, sticking in her and tearing her apart.

While the mismatch between us made it an order of *magnitude* harder for me to manage than it would’ve been for *literally anyone else,* my command of, ***“Kaylee!***” was thankfully heeded, the woman beside me in an instant, putting her hand in mine, as I reached out for her Chi.

“*Follow along with my energy, like Water down a canal,”* I tersely instructed, and she nodded, as I used her complimentary energies to draw away the bits I couldn’t grasp, the mechanic not fighting me as, pulling her Chi along L’s, I tossed it out of us all, the energies coagulating to from a viscus muck that *stank* of Rot.

I lost track of time, before I finally let go of both woman, Mel having passed out at some point, and I distantly recognized the fact that I’d broken her nose, but, *fuck it.* There was a time for talk and there was a time for *getting over your fucking self.*

More gingerly letting go of the spacer’s hand, dropping the Noble to the ground, I stumbled, only to get caught by the woman, something large behind me nudging me back on my feet, and I turned to see it was Rishu.

“Thanks Kobeni, Kaylee,” I nodded, only now realizing the doors had opened, and we were back in the town square, the locals watching from a distance.

Reaching out, I pulled the stones from my bowl, and absorbed all but one, feeling my Chi reserves start to refill, but I was *toast.*

“Okay, let’s try this again,” I stated, holding the last up to my forehead, and, after a moment’s instinctual hesitation, sent it through my skull.

**<LDW>**

Coming to with a slight groan, as a beeping alarm brought me back to consciousness, I sat up in my chair, feeling tired, mentally, but my stressed Chi network was already being soothed by my restored health, one flowing into another, and, did I have more than I did before?

*Level Eight, I guess. Woo.*

However, as Mel sat up with a whimper, hand going to her now unbroken nose, and L *didn’t stir*, it wasn’t worth it.

Standing, the Noblewoman flinched back, but I ignored her, easily vaulting over the table, resting my hand on the back of the blonde’s neck, concentrating, and…

*Good, no remaining taint.*

Her Cultivation was *fucked,* back down to the first level, though not to *absolute* zero, and, having gotten there before, she’d likely progress faster than she had the first time to catch up, the same way I’d technically been.

*If* she woke up.

No, ***when*** she woke up.

And which, despite the Loop resetting, she *wasn’t.*

*Of course we need to heal the* ***doctor****,* I thought darkly, but while I’d avoided Dual Cultivation, for a whole *bunch* of reasons, Boosting and Healing, when we weren’t laying the base Foundation, was doable without any real issue.

“She’ll survive,” I sighed, looking up at the others, who were all staring at me. “Kaylee, do you mind spending, say, an hour a Loop helping me with her? You, for lack of a better phrase, ‘Watering her Wood’ will, as wrong as that sounds, speed her recovery.”

“I, of course I will!” she offered, and I gave her a thankful smile. “But, but what happened?”

Shaking my head, I made my way back to my seat, making sure not to walk by Mel, who was staring at me as if she was only now just seeing me, which, to be honest, *she might be.* “Remember how I said how you *weren’t to cultivate Items of Power?* Well, the Roots of an Imprisoning Divine Tree *absolutely* counted. If she were Zifu level, fuck, that might *still* fuck her up, but it’s a miracle she didn’t just *explode*, though, actually, she was about three minutes from doing *just that*. Thank you for that Mel, Kaylee,” I nodded.

“I…” Kobeni started to respond, looking guilty, but fell silent.

Guessing where she was going, I answered, “Wood feeds Flame. There was a non-zero chance that if you’d tried to help, *you* would’ve taken in that tainted energy, and Flame feeds **Stone**, so then *I* might’ve, and then…” I sighed. “Just a giant clusterfuck all around. But you can’t say she isn’t suffering for her stupidity. Like we were *actually* going to be trapped there,” I scoffed.

“You sounded pretty worried,” Kaylee pointed out.

“I did?” I questioned, confused, as that wasn’t what I was going for *at all.* “I was going for cocky asshole protag that gets the villain to monologue. Oh, well, either way, I was trying to gather as much intel as possible, as going and seeing her again anytime soon is… *likely not going to go well.*”

Absorbing a Stone, I walked myself through what just happened. “But both L and Mel have made it clear how *little* faith they have in me, so L panicked, reached for power beyond her grasp, and…” I waved at the woman, whose hands still bore bark-like scars. “That’ll be reversable, because we got to it fast enough, and I *really* know what I’m doing, and have the help of a complimentary element,” I gestured to Kaylee, “which often isn’t the case in these scenarios, but we’ll be down a team member for a bit.”

“C-Can we do this?” Kobeni questioned, voice small. Shooting her a confused look, the girl stared down into her lap, where Rishu purred, trying to comfort her creator. “I, she was so strong, and it was over so fast.”

“Oh, yeah, we can *totally* do it,” I reassured her. “Assuming we don’t *really* fuck up like L did. It’s just a matter of time, practice, and endurance, which we all have more than enough of. Having our opponent be aware of the Loops, well, *it changes things,* but Q is reset to zero, something about the Tree she’s tied to likely anchoring her, in a way, while *we* can progress.”

Sighing, and standing, I moved over to her, and rested a hand on her shoulder, the Asian girl looking up at me with shining, terrified eyes. “But we can do this. *Together.* Okay?”

“Yeah!” Kaylee agreed. “We got this!”

Not breaking Kobeni’s gaze I waited, until she, hesitantly, nodded. “I, *Yes!”* she nodded, *still* scared, but willing to keep going, and that’s what truly mattered. “If, if you say we do, then we do!”

“I’m not *always* right, but in this? You can trust me,” I smiled, the timer beeping and the roof splitting open.

Striding towards the waiting old man, standing the same place he always did, I greeted him with a wide smile.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Durande. We’re from The Company, and we’re here to help!”